In the Twilight of the Modern Age:
What Stephenie Meyer Can Teach Us About CHAT

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Whatever your thoughts on the book, the audience responses to *Twilight* offer important insights regarding how books are produced and then taken up by society. Examining this can help us better understand Cultural-Historical Activity Theory in terms of three major components: the act of writing, cultural views, and physical resources.

A Note to Readers: QR Codes

I've embedded QR Codes with links to my sources for the article. If you have a smartphone or tablet, simply search for "QR Code Scanner" in your app store, and then use the camera on your device like a bar code scanner. —Ryan

Prologue: How We See Twilight

Once, I heard a well-published novelist say that *Harry Potter* suffered the same problem of many books in its genre—he said it was a good *read*, but not very well *written*.

I had to bite my tongue. I mean, if *Harry Potter* isn't one of the best-written books I've ever read, then what was wrong with me as a reader? Only later did it occur to me that this particular author had probably never read *Harry Potter*. He may have felt he didn't need to. But then, we often hear critiques like this regarding popular books. Stephen King, for example, is not

considered a "literary" author, even though his books have been read and loved by exceptional numbers of people. Ditto for Danielle Steele.

And yet these authors are popular. They live the dream I have long wanted for myself: they make a living from their writing. Their books are read, and read often.

Figure 1

Normally, non-fans tend to accept this success. But not when it comes to Stephenie Meyer. Somehow, it seems that her works—*Twilight*, in particular—have been singled out as being particularly "bad." Or, as Stephenie Meyer writes on her website: "Even those of you who love *Twilight* the most . . . have probably noticed that there's been just a teensy little bit of backlash following the success of the books and films" (stepheniemeyer.com, 14 August 2013). (See figure 1 or http://stepheniemeyer.com/bio.html).

CHAT: An Introduction

Thus, we have two groups: those who want to burn *Twilight* on sight and those who feel the fire of the heart stoked by these words on paper. Understanding what it is about *Twilight* that can stir up such strong emotions is an important part of understanding how today's audiences respond to the books people write.

To sort through these issues, we can turn to CHAT. When it comes to writing, CHAT helps us understand texts as more than mere words on a page. It helps us position texts as social objects, show why they were written in their present form, and then discuss how they're used by their audiences (whether read for pleasure, disdained for immorality, or used as a how-to guide for seducing vampires).

CHAT: Breaking It Down

There are seven individual components to CHAT, but I find it helps to focus these into three major areas: the **act of writing**, the **cultural views** surrounding the reading and writing of these texts, and the **physical resources** available for production and distribution. There are interconnections across all seven components, but these three broad categories give a good place to start. But they're just a shortcut I've come up with—you might find them helpful, or you might find something better. The **seven individual components** of CHAT (on the right-hand side of the Figure 2 chart) are still the most important parts to remember.

Ryan's Major Areas	The Seven Individual Components of CHAT
The Act of Writing	**Production***– actually writing (and the tools you use to do so) **Activity**** – stuff writers do while writing
Cultural Views	**Representation*** – how people see the importance of writing (not just one text, but all pieces of writing) **Socialization** – what people do with a work of writing **Reception** – how people value a specific work of writing
Physical Resources	**Ecology*** – the physical materials and environment surrounding the writer and readers (e.g. books vs. Kindle) **Distribution**** – how writers get their works into the hands of their audiences

* **Production, Representation,** and **Ecology** would be considered the "essential" definition of the associated major area. You can't have an act of writing without production, but the activities surrounding your production can have a major impact on the results of your work.
** **Distribution** and **Activity** are very flexible concepts, and they could easily be placed in other major categories. For example, *New York Times* bestselling novelist E. Lynn Harris placed copies of his first book at beauty parlors around Atlanta. In this case, the activity of his readers going in for a perm became a major component of distribution– and both would then be tied to cultural views relating to why his target audience of African-American women frequented those particular beauty parlors (Valerie Peterson for About.com). See above QR code or http://publishing.about.com/od/ SelfPublishingAndVanityPresses/a/Self-Publishing-Success-Stories.htm.

Figure 2

To make my approach to CHAT a bit more memorable, I've prepared a brief diagram:
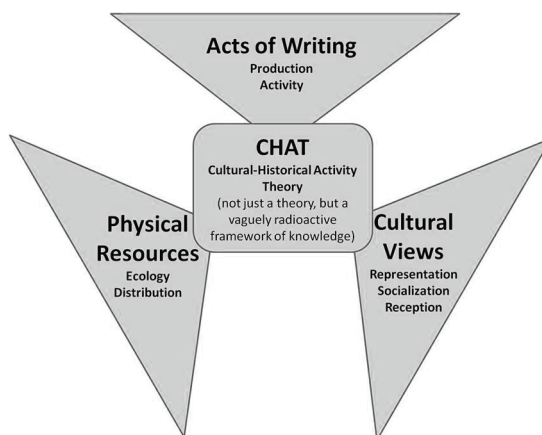

Figure 3

For a specific comparison of CHAT to other models of writing, be sure to see this handout by Kellie Sharp-Hoskins and Erin Frost (Figure 4 or http://isuwriting.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/chat_overview.pdf).

Figure 4

Trajectory and Uptake: What Books Do

Now, before we get into *Twilight*, there's one more crucial aspect of CHAT: **trajectory**. If you've ever seen a space shuttle launch, then you already understand the first component of trajectory: it's the direction a work goes in physical space. A space shuttle goes up into orbit; *Twilight* gets shelved in bookstores around the world.

The second component of trajectory, though, is **uptake**: the way people take in a work, the way they adapt and adopt it as part of their lives. The space shuttle didn't just go up into space. It led ten-year-olds to eat a dried-up strawberry brick in a vacuum-sealed pouch labeled "ice cream." Likewise, *Twilight* has a cultural presence beyond the e-book stored on my iPad. It has been taken up through movies, fan pages, and *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Trajectory isn't just about getting a story into the hands of your readers—it's about what your readers do with the work after it's out in the world. And this is why CHAT is so important. Traditionally, we often think of a work as being "done" or "finished" once the writer has typed in that last word. But *writing* the text is only part of the picture.

The Act of Writing: Production and Activity in *Twilight*

With writing, many people only think of **production**, the actual act of placing words on the page. And production isn't necessarily an easy thing—we park ourselves in front of the computer or we poise ourselves over that blank sheet of paper, pen in hand, and we write. Or we try to. Usually, there's some daydreaming involved. You have to kind of imagine what you're going to say. And then writer's block might set in, or we might get only twenty minutes before something else comes up. And what happens when your pen runs out of ink? (See Ecology.) Or when your mother comes in and tells you to give up writing because "You're no Stephen King?" (See Representation.) Or maybe you need to have a pile of books stacked around you because you're madly skimming for quotes to fit into that paper on *Madame Bovary*? (See Activity.)

Production, then, is never this pristine event that occurs in isolation. For Meyer, getting to the act of production meant working around the other concerns in her life. She is, after all, a mother with three children. In 2003,

when the idea for *Twilight* first came to her, writing was "something I hadn't done in so long that I wondered why I was bothering" (stepheniemeyer.com/bio.html: see Figure 2 QR Code).

At this point in Meyer's experience, it becomes impossible to separate the production of her writing from Activity. In CHAT, activity describes all that stuff you do while engaged in the act of writing. For Meyer, as the mother of three young boys, most of that "stuff" meant that she was doing a lot of her "writing" away from the computer. "Meyer invented the plot during the day through swim lessons and potty training, and wrote it out late at night when the house was quiet" (stepheniemeyer.com/bio.html).

So you might ask, "Well, is that really writing? How can you be *writing* while you're in the middle of getting a child to sit down on a potty and . . . well . . . you know . . . " Short answer: Yes, that's writing; it's the act of arranging thoughts into the coherent framework. There are those who will argue that *Twilight* isn't "coherent" (see Reception), but the book has a firm narrative. Despite what critics might say, Meyer arranged her work to build emotional tension. Don't be misled by assumptions that the book isn't "sophisticated." Bella moves to Oregon, experiences unfortunate events which require help from the local neighborhood vampire, and then has her life saved by said vampire—yes, it sounds simple, but the summary overlooks the interconnections between events. Bella is leaving her home to spend time with her father in a town that's overcast and boring—she's lonely, she's not looking for love, and her clumsy nature makes her an exceptionally vulnerable individual. So when there are vampires in the town that conspicuously glitter in the sunlight, she might be the perfect match for these creatures who must isolate themselves from society. But she's also the ultimate challenge for a supernatural being who lives forever. How, Edward asks himself, will I keep this girl from getting hurt? And how, Bella asks herself in turn, will I convince Edward that I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself?

Although often overlooked by critics, it's these interpersonal conflicts which make *Twilight* not only a "good read," but an emotionally riveting love story. Sure, critics will use labels like "incoherent" as a way to denigrate the book, as a way to imply that the crucial act of organization hasn't happened, but it's clear from the text that Meyer put a lot of thought into her work.

Many feel justified in this critique because Meyer wrote her first draft over the course of only three months. Yes—three months (stepheniemeyer.com/bio.html). But this shows that sitting down to write and getting that work *written* is often far more important than "training" or "preparing" to write. Production, in my eyes, remains the most important component of CHAT— we have to look at what we are doing in order to make sure the words make their way to the page.

Cultural Views Surrounding That Infernal Book: Representation, Reception, Socialization, Reception, and Representation–Inextricably Linked

Reception examines how audiences respond to a specific text. It's what you think of the work, whether you like it or hate it or share it with your friends or toss it in a bonfire.

The ways audiences receive books are closely tied to how they view writing. In CHAT, **representation** addresses the ways in which people see the activity of writing. For example, a Ph.D. student in English might see writing as a complex communication activity that is worthy of long-term research. For a science fiction fan, writing might be a way to explore the "what if?" possibilities of our technological future. For both these groups, writing is seen as a rewarding activity—but the grad student wants to study writing itself, whereas the science fiction reader really just wants to use writing as a means to study something else.

With *Twilight*, the differences in representation lead readers to display very different receptions. Some readers feel that good writing must be "well written" —each sentence shows a clearly rhythmic structure that is clear and easy to follow. For others, the story itself is more important—they want to see a clear progression of events from start to finish. It's not that either group has a "better" or "more valid" reception of a given text—it's that these two groups have differing representations of what matters in writing, and this leads them to value individual texts differently.

We have to understand that Meyer's work exists not only as a series of novels, but as a written text existing within a cultural space. Many cultural spaces, in fact—and several of them are conflicting. Let's start with the romantic elements of the book. As Kira Cochrane of *The Guardian* points out, Twilight poses a bit of a social enigma:

Figure 5

. . . the most interesting outcome of Meyer's work has been the window it has opened on the desires of a generation of girls. Just what is it about the controlling, mercurial vampire Edward Cullen—a character who constantly tells his girlfriend he's dangerous, who constantly polices the couple's sexual boundaries—that they're so drawn to? (See Figure 5 or http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/11/stephenie-meyer-twilight-the-host.)

As Cochrane points out, *Twilight* is reflective of society. *Twilight* didn't suddenly create this idea of vampire love which turns people crazy for

books—instead, Meyer's portrayal of Edward and Bella reveals the unmet desires of many readers. For these readers, *Twilight* isn't just a good book—it resonates with the soul. It captures the frustration of the girl who lives this nothing life in some nothing town surrounded by nothing friends—but there's this *chance* that Mr. Amazing Vampire will fall so madly in love with her that all the nothing of her life will no longer matter.

But not everyone reads the book the same way. As one reader writes in an interview for *Psychology Today*:

> . . . I, like every other reader, identified with Bella . . . . I do know how easy it is to project yourself onto her. I read Bella as a more upbeat character, an essentially happy and outgoing girl, while my more quiet friend read her as slightly more brooding and intense. In any case, in uniting myself with Bella in my mind, I became that much more invested in the story . . .

Figure 6

(See Figure 6 or http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/snow-white-doesnt-live-here-anymore/200903/five-reasons-smart-young-woman-adores-twilight-part-.)

For others, the message of the book gives young women the wrong impressions about love and gender equality. Emily Severance of Cederville University writes that the book is:

> . . . a step back for women in general. Bella's character lacks any sort of independence to make her own decisions because she is completely (and willingly) controlled by Edward.

(See Figure 7 or http://cedars.cedarville.edu/article/52/Twilight-Sends-Wrong-Message/.)

Figure 7

Say what you will about the love between Bella and Edward, it *feels* genuine. Well, at least to me. I am concerned, though, that it shows Bella as being overly dependent upon Edward, and that this could be construed as saying that women "should" be secondary to their male partners. In most cases, when there's a boyfriend who sneaks in at night to watch his not-yet-girlfriend sleep, I would call that stalking. But here it somehow works.

Socialization: Because Writing Affects Our Behavior as People

An individual's views about books will have an effect on how that individual views reading, writing, and the world. People can become very emotional—or even angry—about how writing is represented and received because the

ways we view writing can change our behavior. This is **socialization**: the ways we use writing as part of our daily lives.

With writing, the classic example of socialization is the cookbook—with a cookbook, you can follow the recipes to prepare food. Some individuals view cookbooks as providing the best directions for how to mix and then heat ingredients (representation); typically, these individuals will follow the recipes exactly (socialization). Sometimes, though, there will be a cookbook which everyone knows is a bad book. Like if you had a book titled "The Well-Rounded Marshmallow: A Vegan's Guide to Dessert," then you should probably tell your friends to avoid this book because marshmallows *aren't* vegan, and I'd have serious trust issues with someone who attempts to misrepresent food in a cookbook (reception).

Twilight is a bit more complicated. It's not a "recipe" for love, but many readers see novels as models of real life (representation). For those who "agree" with the "message" of *Twilight*, this might simply mean they spend many hours reading, or it might mean they line up at Barnes and Noble for book release parties, or it could mean they dress up as Edward Cullen for Halloween. Because their reception of *Twilight* invokes feelings of love they themselves yearn for, their socialization typically involves behaviors which further promote the book to their friends.

However, not everyone "agrees" with the book's "message." For those who disagree with *Twilight*, the book becomes dangerous influence on young minds. For them, it's not just that *Twilight* is "bad" or "poorly written" or "sexist" or whatever—they believe the *socialization* from *Twilight* may have negative impacts on society. Or, as Britton Peele writes for the pop culture website of the *Dallas Morning News*:

But it is true that the *Twilight* books aren't masterpieces of writing. That's OK, to some degree. Sometimes a lighter, easier read is better for the reader, especially if you're writing for a younger crowd. But good grief, the fact that we have raised some young people who genuinely think *Twilight* is an amazing achievement and "the best book series ever" might mean we've failed as a species.

Figure 8

(See Figure 8 or http://popcultureblog.dallasnews.com/2012/11/im-a-dude-who-read-all-the-twilight-books-heres-why-i-hate-it-and-why-i-get-it.html/.)

Our "failure as a species"? I want to be like "wait . . . it's just a book." But its popularity has created a backlash. People fear the book is encouraging millions of readers to follow some terrible road to hell.

But it's only fiction, right? Why not criticize something like *The Anarchist's Cookbook*? The socialization for *that* book involves the manufacture of

explosives and the systematic destruction of society. Those are quantifiably bad things, right?

Except *The Anarchist's Cookbook* isn't popular enough to be a marker of species-wide failure. The book isn't threatening to most people because it doesn't have sufficient trajectory. You won't see dozens of copies stacked up in an island of glossy hardbacks right there in the middle of Barnes and Noble. So as a "recipe for disaster," it's a disappointment not because of the contents, but because of the lack of readers.

Crossing Cultures: How Twilight Affects Native Americans

As a rule, I am wary of people who say that a book is going to "destroy society" or who say a book is "the most amazing thing ever!" Contemporary society is far too complex for any one work of writing to have *that* much of an effect.

However, American society has a major effect on other societies—and any work which shifts American attitudes can have serious repercussions for social groups who don't happen to control an international superpower.

Thus far, we've only considered *Twilight* in terms of "popular" American culture—the culture of high school, teen romance, and "family values." But *Twilight's* portrayal of Jacob and other Native American characters has had a significant effect on the Quileute people—and not necessarily a positive one. As Dr. Deanna Dart-Newton and Tasia Endo point out in their post on the Burke Museum's website:

> Made famous by the recent pop-culture phenomenon *Twilight*, the Quileute people have found themselves thrust into the global spotlight. Their reservation, a once quiet and somewhat isolated place, is now a popular tourist destination for thousands of middle-school-age girls and their families. In the wake of the popularity of the book and film saga, the Quileute Tribe has been forced to negotiate the rights to their own oral histories, ancient regalia and mask designs, and even the sanctity of their cemetery.

Figure 9

(See Figure 9 or http://www.burkemuseum.org/static/truth_vs_twilight/.)

Because the reception of *Twilight* is so positive among so many millions of readers, the actual Quileute Indians must now compete with fictional characters and enthusiastic fans for the right to identify their own reality. CHAT is important because it helps us understand not only what we see,

but also what we *don't* see. Readers don't want to make life hard for the Quileute people—but they aren't aware that they have done so. For readers who don't know much about Native American culture, the portrayals of characters like Jacob are so memorable that *Twilight* has helped them *think* that they understand.

The mistake made by critics, though, is to blame effects like this solely on *Twilight*, when the reality is that our society has systematically pushed Native American cultures to the fringes culturally and economically.

The systematic oppression of Native American tribes has been so successful that most Americans today are unaware of this history. When teenagers and their parents read *Twilight*, they often don't realize these larger social issues. As a result, *Twilight* encourages socialization practices which further contribute to this marginalization. This, however, was not Stephenie Meyer's intention. As she writes:

Figure 10

. . . around the same time that I realized it would be out of character for Edward to be able to admit that he was a vampire, I discovered the existence of La Push and started reading about the Quileute's unique history and culture. Jacob developed really naturally from that research, as a solution to my "how does Bella find out" dilemma and also as a way to enrich the mythology. If I hadn't always been very intrigued with Native American history, though, I don't know if the proximity of La Push would have resulted in Jacob's creation.

(See Figure 10 or http://www.stepheniemeyer.com/nm_movie_qanda.html.)

This example helps us see why CHAT is so important for understanding not only writing, but our role as writers. For Meyer, including Jacob and the Quileute in her novels was only intended to deepen the story and share her own fascination with Native American culture. And if we limited our analysis to the text alone, then we wouldn't necessarily see the full social trajectory.

Distribution and Ecology: The Stuff You Have to Get Stuff to the Reader

Ecology is the collection of physical tools and constraints surrounding the writing process, whereas **distribution** is the means by which a text actually reaches its readers. Ultimately, the final **trajectory** of a text is very much dependent upon how easily a writer is able to produce a given work to a socially-acceptable standard, and then how quickly that work can then reach the hands of actual readers.

Meyer's blog says that she composed her work on a computer. This aspect of ecology significantly streamlined her distribution—with a quick click on "Print!" she was ready to market her work to publishers. Granted, she would have first needed to write a query letter for agents, and then a synopsis. And how would she know to do that? Checking the internet, of course.

Now add social media to the mix—in the past year, how many posts about *Twilight* have you seen? Fans are able to connect and share their love of the book with millions of their friends—sometimes to the tune of 81,000 tweets per day. (See Figure 11 or http://mashable.com/2009/11/18/twilight-new-moon-stats/.)

Figure 11

Although *Twilight* the text creates strong reactions among readers, the widespread nature of this response is only possible because of our modern ecologies of distribution. Books can be shipped to your doorstep in two days or less while friends tweet their thoughts to hundreds of people at a time (multiplied by millions of Twitter users . . .).

Today's technology has created an unprecedented situation for writers: nearly any literate human being with access to a computer and the internet could theoretically write and distribute a novel. However, this type of statistic really only applies where broadband internet, reliable computers, and widespread education are considered the norm. As of 2012, the U.N. found that only a third of the world's population has access to the internet—in some nations, less than 1% of households have internet access. (See Figure 12 or http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2012/09/2012923232111323871.html.)

Figure 12

What's most impressive is that these widespread phenomena are taking place at a very personal level. Stephenie Meyer produced a digital draft of *Twilight* at her dining room table. I read the novel from an eight-dollar paperback from a local bookstore. And why? Because one of my best friends is a *major* fan. She posts on *Twilight* a couple times a week—or several times a day during the month leading up to a movie release. I can usually ignore hype, but it's hard to ignore a close friend who says "You need to read this book!" And I liked *Twilight* so much that I handed off my copy to my future wife.

Yes, *Twilight* the book is compelling, but I would argue that *Twilight* as a social phenomenon is only possible because of the Information Age. If Meyer had been limited to handwriting, would she have ever sent her drafts to publishers? If not for the ongoing personal reminders from Facebook, would I have bought the book? *Could* I have bought the book if not for the ubiquity of cheap paper?

Wrapping Up: *Twilight*, CHAT, and Writing

Although personal impressions of the novel vary widely, the praise and criticism generated by *Twilight* help us better see that texts are more than mere words on a page. Instead, each text represents a social link between authors and readers. To succeed in writing, it isn't enough to master some set of "rules" governing how a text "should" be written. Instead, we must consider the ways in which our texts are meant to be read. Who's the audience? What does this audience look for? How can I convince this audience that mine is a work worth reading? What genre conventions (such as grammatical standards or methods of research) do I need to follow so that my audiences will value my work? Ultimately, what do I (as the writer) need to do in order to understand the likely trajectory of my work?

Ryan Edel is a PhD student in creative writing and rhetoric at Illinois State. He studies the success of authors like Stephenie Meyer and Amanda Hocking in order to better understand the interplay between writing, social networks, and the emotional investment of readers. His twelve-part series of science fiction novels has been in the drafting stages since early 1995–the expected release date is very much TBA.