

The Director Desired:
William Desmond Taylor and 1920's Star Discourse

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ABSTRACT

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In an attempt to answer the question of why a recovery of marginalized Silent era director, William Desmond Taylor, is so difficult, this thesis examines an important change that happened in the written discourse about stars in the early 1920's by studying the written discourse on Taylor from 1913-1922. In the 1910's, the discourse on stars was initially focused on stars' labor in the movies. Later, around 1913, this discourse began to focus primarily on the stars' personal lives. The private lives of the stars was established as a site of knowledge and truth. Stars were written about as if they lived lives of physical and moral perfection. Star divorces or scandals of any kind were not covered in this writing. This discourse worked to establish stars as 'healthy' in every sense because if the stars were healthy then Hollywood movies and the activities of reading about the stars and going to the movies was, by extension, a 'healthy' activity. But this discourse began to evolve, and around 1920, things that previously been hidden about the stars lives (divorce, infidelity, financial problems, drug/alcohol use) began to be written about on a regular basis, and these stories did not match the stars' already established personas. This change in discourse partially reveals why the three men (Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle, William Desmond Taylor, and Wallace Reid) involved in Hollywood's biggest scandals of the 1920's were all written about so sensationally in the press, and why the scandal has over-shadowed their contributions to the film industry.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Focus of the Study

The study of the star scandals of the 1920's reveals an important change in star discourse from that of the previous decade. The publicity surrounding the Fatty Arbuckle trial for the rape and murder of Virginia Rappe in 1921, the William Desmond Taylor murder in 1922, and Wallace Reid's death from drug addiction in 1923 reached previously unheard of levels of sensationalism in the national news, but even worse for Hollywood, it reached the fan magazines as well. Before these scandals, all three men, and in fact all the stars of the era, were portrayed in the press as leading exemplary lives, but afterward, the character of the stars and of Hollywood would be called into question as the scandals revealed the possibility for moral and sexual transgression. This thesis examines in depth one of these scandals, the William Desmond Taylor murder, to show how the sensationalized publicity of his death has over-shadowed and complicated the possibility of recovering his life and career for film history.

William Desmond Taylor was one of the foremost figures of Hollywood's silent era. In 1920, Paramount listed Taylor among its top directors in this advertisement from *Photoplay* magazine,

Paramount is the name of the organization which affords the greatest scope for the greatest directors, men of the stamp of Cecil B. DeMille, William DeMille, George Fitzmaurice, George Melford, William D. Taylor, Hugh Ford, and Charles Maigne ("Paramount" 134).

Taylor came to Hollywood in December 1912 and began to work as a film actor immediately upon his arrival for director Thomas Ince at his Inceville Studios in Santa

Monica. In 1914, he appeared in the title role of Vitagraph's *Captain Alvarez*. The film was very successful and made him a recognizable star, but Taylor's aspirations in Hollywood were as a director not as an actor, and by the autumn of 1913, he was already directing films at the Balboa Studio of Long Beach. He went on to make films for Pallas Pictures, Flying A, Hobart Bosworth, and finally, the Paramount subsidiary, Realart, where he was still working when he died. From his very first year in Hollywood, Taylor received a large amount of press coverage, and the star persona that was created for him as an actor was one that was easily transferred onto his role as director. Born in Ireland to a conservative family that supported British control over Ireland, he had a charming accent that, coupled with his tall, handsome and athletic physique, suggested an aristocratic, educated, and gentlemanly authority. By all accounts, Taylor was always impeccably and tastefully dressed. Those who worked with him on film sets in Hollywood praised his ability to commandeer both cast and crew while treating each and every person, star or not, in the same respectful manner. In April 1914, *The New York Telegraph* wrote that a group of extras that had appeared with him in *Captain Alvarez* presented him with a handsome Russian leather bookcase. Inside the bookcase was a letter reading, "To William Taylor, actor, good fellow and gentleman, who will always be thought of by the undersigned as 'Captain Alvarez' (Long 5). Taylor was also one of the founding members of the Motion Picture Director's Association (MPDA), the forerunner of the Director's Guild of America (DGA). It is a testament to the respect he garnered among his peers in Hollywood that just four years after his arrival, he was already serving as president of the MPDA. In 1918 during WWI, Taylor, a British citizen, enlisted in the British Army. While some press reports of the time have him serving active duty, he was

actually transferred from England to Canada after he enlisted, and never fought in any battles. Still, in the public eye, the mere fact of his having voluntarily enlisted while so many other stars did not enlist at all, served to add ‘patriot’ to the already lengthy list of Taylor’s fine attributes. Among the public, Taylor’s films were very popular and made a good deal of money for Paramount. His screen adaptations of both *Anne of Green Gables* (1919) and *Tom Sawyer* (1917) were very successful. Press articles from the time period show that he was very social and often accompanied fellow actors and directors to the Cocoanut Grove at the Ambassador Hotel.

On February 2, 1922, Taylor was found shot to death in his home by his valet, Henry Peavey. When questioned by police, Taylor’s neighbors claimed to have heard what could have been a gunshot the previous evening. One neighbor gave a description of a man she thought she saw leaving Taylor’s home. Despite investigating nearly forty possible suspects and hundreds of leads, police never arrested anyone for the murder. Taylor’s acquaintances could think of no one who could possibly have wanted him dead. Despite all of his achievements, the facts that were revealed about Taylor after his death would forever overshadow them.

In light of the fact that Taylor had been murdered, everything and everyone in Taylor’s life came under public scrutiny, and with no identifiable suspects, the press was free to imagine any and every possible scenario. Seemingly innocuous details like the fact that he had changed his name from William Cunningham Deane-Tanner took on a sinister quality. Taylor had abandoned a wife and child in New York a few years before coming to Hollywood. The fact that Taylor had resumed communication with his ex-wife and daughter did not seem to matter to anyone. Most damningly of all, though, were

the items purported to be found in Taylor's apartment after his death: autographed pictures and letters from both Mabel Normand and Mary Miles Minter, and a pink woman's nightgown. One of Miles' letters read "I love you, I love you, I love you, XO, Mary." In the newspaper accounts, the autographed pictures suddenly became hundreds of photos of naked Hollywood starlets and Taylor was portrayed as a womanizer who led a secret double life. The William Desmond Taylor murder had suddenly become a Hollywood sex scandal.

Of course, Taylor did not exist in a vacuum. One cannot evaluate the public attack on Taylor without examining the time period in which he lived. Taylor's murder is considered one of the big three star scandals of the 1920's that provided the impetus for Will Hays' efforts to clean up Hollywood's tarnished image and later institute the production code. The first of these scandals, Fatty Arbuckle's Labor Day party at which actress Virginia Rappe was allegedly raped by Arbuckle and later died from a ruptured bladder, happened just six months before and was still the front page story in newspapers when Taylor was murdered. Less than a year later in 1923, actor Wallace Reid would die from a drug addiction. Ironically, Arbuckle, Taylor, and Reid were all employees of the same studio—Paramount. In *Picture Personalities*, Richard de Cordova notes a change in written coverage of early stars.

As we have seen, writing of the teens projected a very conventional view of the stars' family lives. The divorces and murders that occupied much of the writing on the stars in the twenties obviously contradicted this view. With the star scandals the star became a site for the representation of moral transgression and social unconventionality (117).

In the late 1960's, Hollywood director, King Vidor, set out to write a script about Taylor's murder. While researching the film, Vidor became the first civilian to view the police file on Taylor's murder, the contents of which finally confirmed that much of what has been written about Taylor after his death was untrue. The files also revealed that on the day Taylor was found, the police on the scene allowed Paramount general manager, Charles Eyton, to remove items from Taylor's bedroom in order to prevent a public scandal. Vidor's research, published in Sidney Kirkpatrick's book *A Cast of Killers*, was also the first to publicly suggest that Taylor was a homosexual, and that Charles Eyton was seeking to remove anything from Taylor's apartment that would reveal that fact. Vidor also interviewed George Hopkins who later wrote an unpublished memoir on his life and his romantic relationship with Taylor. While there is no proof, Hopkins suggests that Eyton went as far as to plant the pink nightgown for police to find in Taylor's bedroom in order to lead the public away from any gay rumors. While most of the writing on Taylor after his death focuses on him as a womanizer, one gay item did make it into the press-- a rumor that Taylor frequented an opium den where "unmanly rituals" occurred was reported by Edward Doherty of the *New York News* and repeated in other newspapers across the country. We will never know what Eyton took from Taylor's bungalow or planted there, but the fact remains that homosexuality was part of Taylor's persona even if it was not public. The star's text is polysemic, made up of elements that are intentionally put forward as well as those that are suppressed.

Film historians often choose to begin their reclamation of a historic figure based on that figure's film work. However, sadly only nine of the sixty-seven features that Taylor directed between 1913 and 1922 exist today and some of those are mere

fragments. There is, however, extensive writing about Taylor from his own time period which can be used to analyze the construction of his persona, and the ways in which it failed him after his death.

Significance of the Study

Firstly, it is the work of film scholars to question the received wisdom, or the lack thereof, on any and all areas of film study. This research is motivated by the lack of a significant scholarly interrogation of Taylor's life and work. While there have been three non-fiction books and an extensive online series called *Taylorology* written on Taylor, a search of online academic databases such as JSTOR and Project Muse reveals that not one single scholarly article written solely about Taylor exists anywhere. A search of ProQuest's online dissertation and thesis database reveals similar results—not one single student scholar has written a graduate level paper on Taylor either. In the small amount of journal articles that do reference Taylor, it is only in regard to his murder scandal and the resulting censorship attack on Hollywood. In contrast, a search for scholarly writing on Mabel Normand yields several academic articles referencing her role as a pioneering figure of the Silent era and of film comedy, and a central figure in the discussion of early feminism and spectatorship. Not only has Normand's career been written about, but an article in *Film History* entitled *Reading Mabel Normand's Library* discusses the change that occurred in her star discourse after Taylor's murder.

The fact that a figure like Taylor, so large in his own time period, was so conveniently and swiftly dispatched to the trash-heap of Hollywood folklore is highly suspect, and there is evidence to suggest that academics, themselves, may have

contributed to this. In his introduction to Bruce Long's *William Desmond Taylor: A Dossier*, film historian Anthony Slide suggests that Taylor was a mediocre director who, had he survived, probably would not have amounted to much. Slide's supposition, unsupported by any reference from the nine surviving films directed by Taylor, is frankly shocking. That a person who regards themselves as a historical film scholar would make such an uninformed and ignorant statement like this in print is extremely disappointing because it renders Taylor an unworthy subject and discourages further study of him within academic circles. Unfortunately, Slide seems caught up in all the bad press that Taylor received after he was murdered. He does not seem to question why, if Taylor was such an important and highly revered figure, he got all that bad press in the first place? In contrast, Kevin Brownlow who analyzed Taylor's film *The Soul of Youth* for his book on Progressive Era Cinema, *Behind the Mask Of Innocence*, suggests that Taylor was, in fact, a very talented director. This difference of opinion between scholars suggests that our knowledge of Taylor's career is filled with gaps and deserves a closer study.

The significance of a study of this figure does not hinge on the qualification of Taylor as a 'good' director, or as a 'good' actor. For the purposes of this study, I will be mentioning but not focusing on Taylor's career as an actor because, while it did establish his reputation in Hollywood, his stint as an actor was very brief and the bulk of the work for which he was recognized during his lifetime was as a director. This thesis uses Richard Dyer's work in his book *Stars* as the theoretical framework for analyzing the written star discourse on Taylor. Although Dyer's theoretical model for interpreting star ideologies has primarily been used solely for Hollywood actors, I propose that a broader use of Dyer's theory to include the star personas of directors is justified with regard to

Taylor because his discourse functioned to establish him as a ‘star’ akin to other stars who worked in Hollywood as actors. I argue that the large volume of writing on Taylor during his career as a director in Hollywood, and the fact that this writing is indistinguishable from the writing on actors in this time period is evidence that Taylor was regarded in the public eye as a star and therefore his persona can be read with regard to its ideological function.

This research does not aim to position Taylor as an undiscovered and under-appreciated directing talent from the Silent era. Rather, I argue that Taylor’s significance for film studies lies in his potential as a site for examining the history of star discourse. Also, Taylor as a homosexual has not been discussed in academic circles, and it is important to examine how and why stars’ histories have been obscured and how that affects the way they were seen in their own time and also the way we see them today. Finally, the history of stardom has experienced a renewed interest within film studies in the 2000’s, and I believe that an investigation of William Desmond Taylor will inform and contribute to that area of study.

Methodology

This thesis uses primary source material published in national newspapers, magazines, and Hollywood trade publications from 1913-1941. These letters, articles, publicity pieces, and pictures are used to discuss Taylor’s public persona and how he was covered in the press in the years before his murder as a moral guidepost as contrasted with how he was written about afterward as morally and sexually transgressive. In addition, the secondary sources of contemporary research published on Taylor in three

non-fiction books will illuminate facts of his early life before Hollywood. These are important because the previously unpublished details of his life were portrayed in a negative light in the press coverage after his death. Richard deCordova's film scholarship on the history of the early star system and the important changes in public discourse on stars in the early 1920's provides the historical context for my research, and at least partially addresses the question of why the Taylor murder was written about in such a sensational fashion. Richard Dyer's work on stars as social phenomena provides the theoretical framework for this thesis. Dyer's theories, though usually only applied to actors, can reasonably be applied to Taylor as a director because Taylor's written star discourse functioned to establish him as 'star' in the same terms that actors of the this time period were stars and the public viewed him as such. In *Stars*, Dyer writes that "star images function crucially in relation to contradictions within and between ideologies, which they seek variously to 'manage' or resolve (34). Within this ideological context, the star image of William Desmond Taylor can be seen as mediating a social conflict concerning traditional ideas of masculinity and a purported over-feminization of society which was occurring in the late teens and early 1920's in America. However, after his death, his star persona was read as oppositional to traditional American values of sexual relations between unmarried men and women.

Review of Literature

In his astounding journal, *Taylorology*, which is free and available to all on the internet, Bruce Long has amassed what could be the largest collection of articles and other public documents such as the coroner's inquest on William Desmond Taylor to be found anywhere. Long has been obsessed with the Taylor murder for decades and knows so much about it that he is even able to point out all of the factual errors in the three books published on Taylor's murder: Robert Giroux's *A Deed of Death*, Sidney Kirkpatrick's *A Cast of Killers*, and Charles Higham's *Murder in Hollywood*. The first installation of *Taylorology* was published in book form as *William Desmond Taylor: A Dossier* and is a collection of many of the press releases, newspaper, and magazine articles written on Taylor from his arrival in Hollywood in 1913 until well after his death. It includes a 1941 letter from a detective who worked the original Taylor murder investigation suggesting that the police and DA's office knew who killed Taylor from the beginning but covered it up for Paramount. *Taylorology* is a goldmine of historical materials begging for a critical analysis.

Much of the factual knowledge that we have about Taylor today was uncovered in the late 1960's by director King Vidor in his research for a movie that he was writing about Taylor. His research is published in Sidney Kirkpatrick's book *A Cast of Killers*. It proved that much of the writing on Taylor from the 1920's was false and paved the way for a true study of Taylor's life.

Very little scholarly writing exists on Taylor, but Richard deCordova dedicates an entire chapter in his book *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* to the star scandals and discusses a general shift in the coverage of stars that

began to happen in the early 1920's. While even the earliest writing on stars suggested the potential for scandal in their lives, it always ended by emphasizing the star's morality and denying the possibility. And while a star's divorce might have a few lines in the newspaper, it was never a subject covered by the fan magazines in the teens. By the early 1920's though, the suppressed underside of the stars' lives began to be fully exploited by the press, "and moral transgression became a regular feature of star discourse, a part of the formula for writing about stars (120).

While deCordova focuses on the construction of early stars, Richard Dyer laid the foundation for the study of stars as texts that could be read ideologically in his seminal work *Stars*. He continued his study with *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* in which he analyzes the star texts of Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson, and Judy Garland. In *Heavenly Bodies*, Dyer outlines a methodology for determining the cultural significance of stars by researching the ideological discourses surrounding them. His analysis of Judy Garland focuses particularly on how gay audiences have embraced her star persona. The academic study of stars, fame, and celebrity which began in the 1960's with works by Daniel Boorstin and Leo Lowenthal, has seen an expansion in the last decade and is a popular subject in literary and cultural studies as well. In her article, *Starring...Dyer?: Revisiting Star Studies and Contemporary Celebrity Culture*, Su Holmes argues against those scholars who have questioned Richard Dyer's continued relevance in the field of star studies in the 2000's given that his work was focused on the Classical Hollywood period. Holmes concludes that, while the nature of stardom has evolved significantly since Dyer published his work and some of the focus on stardom in film studies has

shifted to areas like the impact of new technologies, Dyer's emphasis on the way in which stars engage society's social issues is still extremely relevant to film studies today.

Chapter Outline

Chapter two, "Star Discourse in Early Hollywood" examines star discourse pre- and post- 1920 and discusses the change in how stars were written about in the period just before the star scandals started to make major headlines in 1921. Beneath the stars' public personas lay the potential for scandal, and though it was never directly addressed in the discourse of this period, it was clearly alluded to. This chapter also examines the history of how early stars were constructed, and how that differed significantly from the period after the star scandals. Before 1920, stars were written about as models of morality and family values and this created a problem for Hollywood when the stars' real private lives began to be covered in the press. The stars' moral values were often used as a defense against film censorship, but after many stars began to be seen as immoral, Hollywood had to fight against a federal censorship bill.

Chapter three, "Deconstructing Bill Taylor", will focus on the career of William Desmond Taylor and the star persona that was created for him by studying the photos, publicity, and press coverage that he received during his career as an actor and director in Hollywood from 1913-1922. This chapter will use Richard Dyer's theoretical work in star studies to discuss the possible ideological significance that Taylor's persona held for early audiences.

Chapter four, “Murder and Myth”, discusses the Taylor murder and the resulting scandal. Again, archival newspaper and magazine coverage from the 1920’s are used to show how Taylor’s upstanding reputation was ruined when details of his life were revealed to the press after his death. Taylor’s persona has been misread due to both press fabrication and neglect on Paramount’s part to preserve any legacy of Taylor’s contribution to film history.

Chapter 2: Star Discourse in Early Hollywood

William Desmond Taylor established his career first as an actor in Hollywood in 1913, just as the early star system was solidifying. A brief historical background of stardom and star publicity will provide an understanding of this time period in film history and help to illuminate the conditions under which Taylor's own star persona was created. Before the advent of television, star personas like Taylor's were created primarily through photographs and written discourse including publicity releases, newspaper and magazine articles, articles in trade publications, and advertisements. Prior to 1913, the written discourse on stars dealt mainly with their professional lives, but after this period the main focus of the writing shifted to be almost exclusively on their private lives. "The private lives of the players were constituted as a site of truth and knowledge" (deCordova 98). This discourse established the stars of the Silent era as 'healthy' in every sense of the word. Articles written on everything including the stars' working habits and working conditions, their home lives, their possessions, and their hobbies idealized the stars' lives as equaling moral and physical perfection. William Desmond Taylor was no exception. The written discourse on him established him as an athletic, handsome, generous, successful person that his peers respected and with whom they loved to work and socialize. The main goal of this discourse was to establish stars and by extension movies and movie-going as a healthy activity for movie fans.

To study the beginnings of the written discourse on stars, it is necessary to look at the history of the emergence of the 'star' and the 'star system.' The term 'star system' is defined as a method of creating and promoting stars in the Classical Hollywood cinema (roughly 1910 to 1960), and written discourse is one method used in this system. When

examining the history of the star system, one of the first questions that arises is, “Are stars a phenomenon of production (arising from what the makers of films provide) or of consumption (arising from what the audience for films demands)?” (Dyer 9). From the very beginning, writers have disagreed on the answer to this production vs. consumption question. In 1919, journalist and scenario writer, Frank E. Woods argued that it was the public that created the demand for stars. Because the film manufacturers refused to release the names of the actresses in their films, the public began to name them themselves, as in *The Vitagraph Girl* and *the Biograph Girl*.¹ Woods claims that the fans’ desire to get the names of their favorite players was so great that they began to write him letters at the *Dramatic Mirror* to get the information. According to Woods, Kalem was the first company to release the names of stars followed soon after by Vitagraph, but Biograph would not give in until later.²

In 1925, film historian, Terry Ramsaye, author of *A Million and One Nights*, offered a completely different explanation for the emergence of stars. His argument, which remains influential to this day, was that Carl Laemmle, one of the prominent independent producers of this time, began implementing the star system as a way to challenge the authority of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) because the members of the MPPC, like Biograph and Vitagraph, did not yet use actor’s names to publicize their movies. After Laemmle convinced actress Florence Lawrence to leave the Biograph Co. and join his own Imp Co., he planted a publicity item that had Lawrence being hit and killed by a trolley car in St. Louis. The next day Lawrence arrived at an

¹ Actress Florence Lawrence was the Biograph Girl and actress Florence Turner was referred to as the Vitagraph Girl.

² Woods is actually mistaken here. Newspaper articles from 1912 show Biograph used star names in their advertising as early as 1912.

already scheduled public appearance in St. Louis announcing that not only was she not dead, but that she was now the new Imp Girl. The significance of this event, if true, is that, for the first time, a 'star' was used to promote a studio and entice an audience to come see Florence Lawrence in the new films she would be making for Imp. In order to compete for business, the other studios followed Laemmle's example and began promoting their films using stars as well, and in time, the star system became the main focus of movie promotion.

In his 1931 book, *A History of the Movies*, Benjamin Hampton agrees with Ramsaye that the star system began out of a dispute between the Patents Trust and the Independents, but he asserts that the Independents' stated strategy of giving the public what it wanted, which were the stars, was not a calculated move even though it happened to work in their favor. Hampton believes the Independents merely got lucky by giving in to the public's desire. Hampton disagrees that Florence Lawrence was the first star. In his opinion the first star was Mary Pickford. Although Hampton does not give specific reasons for his argument, it is possibly because Pickford went on to become one of the biggest stars of the silent era with a much longer career than Lawrence.

Alexander Walker's *Stardom: The Hollywood Phenomenon* published in 1970 provides a revisionist account of the Carl Laemmle/Florence Lawrence story. Walker claims that Lawrence was actually out-of-work at the time she was approached by Laemmle. She had been blacklisted by the MPPC for trying to negotiate a better contract. He claims that the oft-repeated assertion that the manufacturers were resisting the star system was also true of the players themselves. The actors did not want to be billed in films because it was considered an illegitimate profession. There is evidence of

this in a story told by a San Francisco acquaintance of William Desmond Taylor's who said he was hesitant to move to Los Angeles and try his hand at movie acting because "he had expressed an aversion to the class of people in the business at that time [1912] (Long 2). However, film historian, Anthony Slide completely disagrees with that assertion. Slide claims that the actors in question would have had no argument with their names being published because, as mere regional theater actors with no established reputation, they had no reputation to lose in the first place. He also asserts that Biograph did not, as other historians have argued, resist publishing the names of their actors until 1913. The evidence of this is shown in newspaper articles from 1912 that list the names of actors in films made by Biograph. The disagreements and inaccuracies show just how important it is for each scholar to do his/her own research from primary source materials, rather than relying on a predecessor's theory or research.

In *Picture Personalities* Richard deCordova finds all of the above explanations problematic because within the assertion that the public seemingly demanded stars out of the blue lies no clear explanation for what might have created this public demand in the first place. deCordova posits that while the account of Laemmle/Lawrence may be factual, giving in to the "great man theory" [my quotes] that one person dreamed up the star system overnight "ignores(s) the complexity of the conditions that made the star system possible—and desirable—at a given time" (8). The assertion that manufacturers and stars resisted revealing players' names assumes that they would have had a reason to do this in the first place. "The resistance to the star should not be ascribed so much to stubbornness of manufacturers as to the prevailing view of the film commodity before

1907” (deCordova 7).³ He asserts that there is no evidence that the actors or manufacturers resisted the release of their names, and the proof of this lies in the fact that trade magazines from the time period show that MPPC manufacturers like The Edison Company, Kalem, and Vitagraph did use actor names in the promotion of their films prior to 1913 (8).⁴ A regular column titled ‘In the Moving Picture World’ in the December 17, 1911 issue of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* shows that Vitagraph did use star names to promote their films prior to 1913.

The Vitagraph Company announces that the first appearance of Marshall P. Wilder and John Bunny is to be used in a comedy called “Chumps” (“Vitagraph”).

The cinema existed for over ten years before the star system appeared. Early films consisted mainly of filmed events featuring real public figures like politicians. Examples of some of these films made by the Edison Company are *President McKinley’s Speech at the Pan-American Exposition* (1901), *Admiral Dewey Landing at Gibraltar* (1899), and *Governor Roosevelt and Staff* (1899). The predominant genres of this era were documentaries, travel films, and sports films. These figures’ already established notoriety outside the cinema is what attracted audiences to see these films. While the theater of this time period did already have its own well-established star system that was actively used in the promotion of theatrical productions, it was not a given that film manufacturers should adopt this process. The reason lies both in how early film was exhibited and categorized as an entertainment. Prior to 1907, films were not yet

³ Due to an increased demand for films, production practices shifted in 1907 from documentary to narrative forms and thereby increased the need for actors (Long 27).

⁴ This throws doubt on the theory that Carl Laemmle was the first person to use stars to promote films because this theory assumes that none of the MPPC members were using stars to promote films before 1913.

exhibited in movie theaters; they were shown predominantly in vaudeville theaters and fit into a category of entertainment that was more akin to scientific gadgetry. The kinetoscope was a novelty to audiences who paid to see both the machine and the content it produced.

By 1905 films were being shown in nickelodeon houses. The period of time between 1905 and 1907 has been singled out as a very crucial time in the development of the film industry. The nickelodeons experienced such a boom in this period that the manufacturers could not keep up with the demand for new films requiring major changes in industrial practices. Although the formation of the MPPC in 1908 was designed to form a monopoly, its attempt to establish more connections between production, distribution, and exhibition did help to organize what had previously been a set of extremely chaotic filmmaking practices. To meet the demand for new films, the production process became faster, more studios were built, and stock companies of actors were formed. The final change that occurred is most relevant to the development of stardom--production practices shifted towards producing more fictional narrative films.

This move towards fictional narrative film prompted some important shifts with regard to labor in the cinema. In the early days of film exhibition, the presentation consisted of not only the film's content but the projectionist as well. Sometimes lecturers would accompany the film and give live commentary throughout. Consequently, for the audience, the focus of the labor was on the projectionist and/or the lecturer. But with the shift to fictional narrative, the audience began to focus on another type of labor—that of the actors in the films (deCordova 30). The discourse on stardom could not begin until the audience began to shift its attention away from the apparatus producing the image.

The public discourse on stars began initially with a discourse on the issue of acting in film. At this point in time, the profession of acting was largely associated with the theater. The people who wrote about films did not initially consider that what people did in films was ‘acting.’ This viewpoint is partially based on the view of the filmed body in this time period which seemed to be confused “between a photographic conception of the body and a theatrical one—between posing and acting” (deCordova 34). This view of the photographed body as somehow different from the theatrical body was problematic and required a model to regulate and transform this notion. The theatrical model and ‘acting’ solved this problem. Around 1907 writers “worked to constitute the “picture performer” or “film actor” as a subject of discourse (deCordova 32). The general view that actors did not ‘act’ in films might also have had a lot to do with the nature of performance in the early fiction films. The actors’ gestures were overly exaggerated and resembled more pantomime than what we would consider acting today. The discourse on acting worked to make a distinction between posing and acting, and eventually films began to appear that actually gave credence to the idea that people acted in films.

The most famous of these films were the French Films D’Art distributed by the Pathé Company and released in the United States beginning in 1909. The Films D’Art were moving pictures of theatrical plays starring popular theater and vaudeville performers. One of their biggest successes was the 1912 release of *Camille* starring Sarah Bernhardt. Bernhardt was considered the world’s greatest and most famous actress and she had become a ‘photoplayer’ finally giving legitimacy to the idea that people really did act in films. “The notion of the film actor emerged through its association with this established tradition (theater)” (deCordova 39). American film companies began to

make adaptations of famous literary works as well. The emphasis in this period on a theatrical model of fine acting culminated in the formation of Adolph Zukor's Famous Players Film Company in 1912. Zukor formed a partnership with the powerful New York theatrical impresarios, the Frohman brothers, to form the Famous Player's Film Company. Their first production was the 1913 film *The Prisoner of Zenda*. Once the manufacturers were able to rationalize production and produce a larger number of films, the need for each company to differentiate their product from that of the other companies became necessary, and the emphasis on individual stars was a way to accomplish this. Stars became considered as "something that could be exploited and advertised to increase business for a particular film" (deCordova 50).

Around the time of 1910 begins what deCordova calls the emergence of the "picture personality" (51). That is, an actor or actress whose identity was now solely based on their appearances in films. Previous to this time period, actors were first known by name based on their theatrical reputations, but many audiences had not had access to see all those stage performances before that actor's appearances on film. Now, through film, wider audiences could see every performance of a particular star, and thus the audience could feel like it was more actively participating in the fame of the picture personality. The picture personality was a movie star, not a stage performer appearing in films. Publications such as the weekly motion picture trade magazine, *Moving Picture World*, and theatrical trade paper, *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, began dedicating entire articles to stars. It is also around this time, that we begin to see what would be considered star publicity. That is, articles produced by the manufacturers in a direct effort to promote their films through the use of film stars. In this advertisement placed by

the Universal Film Manufacturing Company, the fine qualities of actor Harry Carey are used to promote Carey, the film company, and its movies:

Harry D. Carey, college graduate, cowboy, street railway superintendent, lawyer, actor...and movie film star....Harry Carey's methods are quiet in this great play JUST JIM, as in his tremendous success in the spoken drama MONTANA which he played on Broadway for a year and a half ("Universal" 177).

Carl Laemmle's publicity stunt using his actress Florence Lawrence is not the only example of using stars to promote a film, but it is one of the examples of how successful this type of publicity turned out to be. Immediately following Laemmle's stunt, an article appeared in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* naming Florence Lawrence as the most famous American actress. Although Lawrence did emerge as one of the most popular film actresses of this time period, her success, like many of the early stars, was short-lived. This was probably due to the fact that she joined and left several film companies in quick succession. Not long after joining Imp, she left to join Lubin before her contract with Imp had expired. Imp was forced to sue her, and focus their publicity efforts on another star they had just acquired from Biograph---Mary Pickford.

1913 and 1914 mark a significant period in the history of star discourse. "The question of the player's existence outside his or her work in film became the primary focus of discourse. The private lives of the players were constituted as a site of knowledge and truth" (deCordova 98). Serialized fiction stories about Hollywood movie life were very common in newspapers and magazines of the teens and 20's. From these emerged an entirely new literary genre—Hollywood fiction. Many of the stories were

about men and women leaving their small town homes in pursuit of Hollywood fame, but inevitably the main character would encounter some sort of unwelcome sexual advance or other tribulation along the way that they would have to overcome in order to become a star. Stories like Robert Carlton Brown's *My Experiences as a Film Favorite* (1913) and Francis Sullivan's *The Glory Road* (1916), both printed in *Photoplay* magazine, contained the potential for scandal that would later overtake the discourse on stars in the 1920's, but in this time period, the scandal within the story was always averted. Writing on the stars' lives at this time always focused on the wholesome healthiness of the actors and there were always references to their family lives. After 1913 references to the stars' marriages were a regular feature. A *Photoplay* pictorial from 1914 of Mary Pickford and then husband Owen Moore shows Mary stepping away from their car looking mortified. The photo's caption reads, "She is telling Friend Husband that he missed one bump on the way home, and he can't drive her any more." Another caption chastely reads, "Mary and Owen are more like friends than married folks" (Whitfield 57).

Many magazines such as *Photoplay* had a question and answer section where the fans could ask questions about their favorite stars. At first, *Photoplay* refused to answer questions about the stars' married lives, but by 1915 they were publishing articles with titles such as *Who's Married to Who in the Movies*. There were also articles and photos featuring the stars' children. All of this was meant to establish the stars' healthy domestic lives outside of their work. This 1916 interview with actress Blanche Sweet from *Motion Picture Magazine* is a typical example of the discourse on the stars' family lives.

I managed to discover that she lives with her grandmother, since she was unfortunate enough to lose both parents when she was quite young. She is a very sane, level-headed young girl, who has her eye on a certain goal and who means to get there some day (Courtlandt 145).

All of this focus on the family in writing about stars necessarily led to many articles with the stars pictured in their own homes. Of course it would have been fairly obvious to the fans that the stars' homes were far from ordinary—they were luxurious and even decadent in some cases owing to the stars' large incomes. "Discourse on the star began to take on another strategy—to promote the values of consumerism that began to dominate American life in the teens and twenties" (deCordova 108). In displaying their success via material wealth and possessions, the stars lived the idea that satisfaction was no longer to be found in one's work but through one's activities outside of work—in consumption and leisure activities. An example of this type of discourse is found in this article from *Moving Picture World*, July 24, 1915:

Florence Crawford is an ardent advocate of outdoor sports for women. In California, she seldom missed a day of horseback riding and her clever work in the Majestic-Reliance pictures often included feats on horseback. Next to riding, she loves swimming and was called upon in her last Mutual Picture, "Buried Treasures," to show what she could do ("Florence Crawford" 632).

Much of the discourse on stars began to focus on what the stars did with their leisure time. Some of the stars' hobbies such as reading literature, playing musical

instruments, or attending the theater made them seem very refined in their tastes. Others claimed to love very common activities like cooking, embroidery, or gatherings with friends. Automobiles were also becoming very popular at this time in history, and any star who owned one was viewed not only as wealthy but also thoroughly modern. Motoring was quoted as by far the most popular hobby of the stars in the writing of this time period. Motor cars were in such scarce supply and gas was still so expensive that most Americans did not yet own one. This 1915 article from *Moving Picture World* about actress Ruth Roland manages to incorporate hobbies, fashion, and cars:

She has her own car and drives it much. “Dancing? Yes, I am crazy about it. That cup you are looking at was won by Mr. Eltinge and myself after a real contest. Yes, I have hobbies too. Hats are one of them. No, I can’t tell you how many of them I have—more than anyone in the town, I am afraid. I make most of them myself” (“Ruth Roland” 58).

Although the representation of the stars’ behavior was somewhat limited by traditional ideas of morality, the star could be acceptably and simultaneously adored as a person absolutely free to pursue the pleasures created by this emerging consumer culture. It was in this way that the stars became idols of consumption and began, themselves, to appear in national advertising campaigns for all sorts of products. Many female stars appeared in ads for beauty products. This ad copy next to a picture of Universal Film star Gladys Walton from a 1921 issue of *Photoplay* magazine illustrates how stars were used to endorse beauty products:

Daring eyes that glance sidelong through dark lashes. Eyes that flash
“Beware” from beneath a shadowing fringe. Languorous eyes with sleepy

lids that sweep their silken lashes upon the cheek. You can make your eyes luminous, fascinating by nourishing and aiding their growth with Lashlux (“Lashlux” 80).

For the most part star discourse held to the previously discussed structure throughout the teens except for one aspect—even though star discourse had established itself using a theatrical model, this discourse now worked to distance itself from the theater. Theater actors and the profession of stage acting, itself, had a long history of scandal. Now that the film business had established itself on a model of morality and healthfulness, it no longer desired any association with the theater. Although the star scandals that occurred beginning in 1921 have often been viewed as an abrupt change in star discourse, Richard deCordova views the scandal in this time period as the natural evolution of this discourse. The star system has always functioned to lead us beyond the film text and into a contemplation of the stars themselves. Star discourse worked to extend the stars’ lives beyond movie theaters and insert them more fully into the fans’ lives. Even before the Fatty Arbuckle scandal, writing on stars had begun to focus on the domestic problems of the stars. References to divorces, adultery, and moral transgression began to become a regular feature of the discourse on stars. This passage from *Photoplay* 1921 is a good example of this new style of discourse:

One of Conway Tearle’s former wives is suing him for more alimony. We forget which one. She says Conway is getting more money from the company for which he is making pictures than he has ever received before in his career and she wants some of it (deCordova 120).

Condescending stories of the stars' divorces, like this one, obviously worked against the family discourse that had been used in the teens to support the idea that stars and movies themselves were a healthy pastime, but many stars were somehow able to dodge the stigma of divorce. The prime example of this is Mary Pickford's divorce from Owen Moore and quickie marriage to Douglas Fairbanks. Even though it was fairly obvious to the public that Pickford and Fairbanks were engaged in a years-long affair before they got married, the public embraced the couple wholeheartedly. Star divorces did not even come close to the level of sensationalism that would follow, but they showed that star discourse was no longer limited to stories of success and marital perfection—rather infidelity, immorality and loss were now a part of the formula.

On September 12, 1921 newspapers announced what would become the most shocking scandal of the 1920s. After a rowdy Labor Day party in his San Francisco hotel suite, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle was being held in a jail cell for allegedly raping and causing the death of a young actress, Virginia Rappe, who had attended the party and later died from peritonitis. Arbuckle was literally and figuratively one of Paramount's biggest stars. He was large and overweight which added to his appeal as a comic actor, and he was always written about as a man with a large appetite. This image of excess supported the hints of sexual impropriety that began to emerge in the coverage of Rappe's death. A few of the partygoers stated that they thought that Arbuckle had been alone with Rappe when she started to scream in pain. Doctors later stated that external force had caused Rappe's bladder to rupture which in turn had caused the peritonitis that killed her. The stories must have conjured images of Fatty literally crushing Rappe with his bulk. Arbuckle was eventually indicted for manslaughter but after three trials he was

acquitted. The scandal that emerged quickly became less about Arbuckle's guilt/innocence and much more about the new picture of Hollywood life that it revealed. Stories about Arbuckle's allegedly infamous parties began to circulate and details about Rappe's alleged former career as a scantily clad erotic entertainer aboard steamships were reported in newspapers as well. Although tame by today's standards, the details that emerged about Arbuckle's party were shocking to readers of the time. Liquor was served which was illegal at the time because of Prohibition, one female guest reported having as many as ten drinks, jazz was playing on a phonograph in the room, and Arbuckle attended the party in silk pajamas and bare feet.

The star scandals represent a rupture in star discourse. After Arbuckle came the William Desmond Taylor murder (covered in Chapter 3 of this thesis) in 1922, and Wallace Reid's death from drug addiction in 1923. Before this time, the 'star' had functioned well for Hollywood in two ways—as publicity and as public relations. After 1921, the star's PR value took a sharp downturn. Instead the stars became the subject of social controversy because the cinema had lost control over star discourse. Hollywood's moral health had always been an argument against censorship, but with the star scandals, Hollywood's morality was under question, and reformers saw an opportunity to bring broad attacks on the stars as well as on the industry. By 1922, the disreputable lives of the stars were being used as an argument for adopting a federal censorship bill. The industry's counter-move was to appoint Will Hays as head of the MPPDA (The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) in November 1921. While he was originally appointed to create a unified distribution system for the industry, Hays became seen by the public as the man who was going to clean up Hollywood and rid the industry

of the threat of censorship (deCordova 131). And he succeeded, because after he was appointed, none of the city, state, or federal censorship bills were passed into legislation.

Finally, because Hollywood does not exist in a vacuum, there is no doubt that broad social changes happening in American society—consumerism, sexual experimentation, and secularization of marriage—affected the stars. The star scandals were both a part of and were caused by changes that were external to the cinema. These were broad historical and social changes that affected the stars just as they affected society at large (deCordova 137). The history of early stardom provides the context to discuss how the written discourse on William Desmond Taylor shaped his own star persona, and why that construction failed him during the scandal that followed after he was murdered in 1922.

Chapter Three: Deconstructing Bill Taylor

In *Stars*, Richard Dyer discusses the nature of the ideological effect of stars.

Stars are, like characters in stories, representations of people...However, unlike characters in stories, stars are also real people. This point is suggested time and again in writing about stars. Because stars have an existence in the world independent of their screen/'fiction' appearances, it is possible to believe that as people they are more real than characters in stories. This means that they serve to disguise the fact that they are just as much produced images, constructed personalities as 'characters' are (20).

According to Dyer, star ideology is discussed in two ways—ideological content and ideological work (20). The ideological content of a star would be what a star symbolizes for an audience or how they are 'read.' The quote above elaborates on the ideological work of the star phenomenon. The written discourse on stars emphasizes that they are real people while at the same disguising the fact that their 'real' persona is just as much a construction as a character is. It may be possible to gain a greater understanding of the construction of and later, failure, of William Desmond Taylor's star persona via Dyer's discussion of some of the distinctions of early stardom.

In the early period, stars were gods and goddesses, heroes, models—embodiments of *ideal* ways of behaving. In the later period, however, stars are identification figures, people like you and me—embodiments of *typical* ways of behaving...the early stars maintained a distinction

between the ideal (what should be) and the *status quo* (what is)—they were a ‘negation’ (22).

Dyer also discusses stars in relation to prevalent social norms and suggests that stars can reinforce or transcend societal values. Stars can also embody values that are seen to be in crisis. The actor, Will Rogers, is a good example of this. During the Depression he represented the old-fashioned American value of the dignity of the individual in a time period when that value was in crisis in the United States. The public discourse on William Desmond Taylor found in articles from trade magazines, fan magazines, and newspapers is valuable evidence that can be used to examine the construction of his star persona. In this discourse we can see that Taylor was evaluated on a few different levels. Early articles on him make mention of his past as an Irish national with a private school education, his long career as a stage actor traveling with stock theater companies, and as a world traveler and adventurer. Although many of these details are a mix of fact and fiction, they were used to create a history for Taylor, who would not have been known to a film audience as he was new to the Hollywood scene. Thus, Taylor became valued not only for his acting and directing skills but for his past history as well.

It is illuminating to look at a brief history of what biographers have uncovered about Taylor’s real life in order to compare it to how he was portrayed through star discourse. Through this comparison we can see how star histories are manufactured to both highlight and obscure information about stars. Though studio biographies place his birth in 1877 in Mallow, Ireland, Taylor was actually born William Cunningham Deane-Tanner on April 26, 1872 in Carlow, Ireland (Long 11). His father was Captain Thomas

Kearns Deane-Tanner of the Kings Royal Rifle Corp. and his mother was Jane O'Brien, the daughter of wealthy landowners. He had an older sister, Ellen, and younger brother and sister, Denis and Daisy. Another brother, Oswald, died in infancy. Biographers have interpreted that facts of Taylor's life indicate that he did not get along well with his parents, and considering that he was, for the most part, estranged from his family after coming to the United States and that he did not inherit as much money from the family estate as his sister, he probably did not have a close relationship with his family. Two other details indicate that Taylor did not quite live up to his parents' standards: unlike his siblings, who were sent to private boarding schools to study, Taylor was schooled at home, and in 1889 he was sent away to a dude ranch known as Runnymede in Kansas. At Runnymede he learned the hands-on skills that he would later use to eke out a living: carpentry, hunting, and horseback riding. After Runnymede closed in 1892, Taylor did not go back to Ireland but set out on a life as a wandering laborer traveling to Missouri, Minnesota and Chicago where he joined Fanny Davenport's famous acting company under the stage name of Cunningham Deane. It was his career as a traveling actor that brought him to New York in 1899, and with money from his family's estate, he moved into an expensive apartment building on Fifth Avenue (Higham 31).

Taylor socialized with the wealthy society of New York and it was through these contacts that he gave up acting and became an antiques dealer. It was at this time that he met and began dating a stenographer and theater dancer named Ethel Hamilton whom he nicknamed Daisy after his sister. Taylor and Ethel married in 1901, and had a daughter, Ethel Daisy, born November 15, 1902. Taylor's brother, Denis, a soldier who had just served in the Boer War came to New York in 1903. Strangely, Taylor did not attend his

brother's marriage to Ada Brennan in April 1907. Biographers have speculated on the nature of Taylor's sexuality and whether he was possibly gay or bisexual. According to Charles Higham's biography, *Murder In Hollywood*, Taylor spent a lot of time in New York's bars and had his own bachelor apartment where he might have been cheating on his wife with women, men, or both.

In 1908, Taylor left New York abandoning both his wife and daughter, but the reasons for this are suspected to be primarily financial. 1907 brought the great American financial panic affecting everyone including even the most wealthy citizens. During this time, it is suspected that the antiques business of Arthur J. Taylor for whom Taylor worked was manufacturing fake antiques in order to survive the financial crisis. Taylor was already in debt from living a lifestyle well above his own means, but he was relying on an inheritance from Henry J. Braker, one of the partners in the antiques business. When Braker died and left Taylor's share of the money to his widow instead, Taylor obviously felt there was nothing left to do but leave town altogether. Before he left, he borrowed \$600 from the antiques business. Leaving \$500 for his wife, he took \$100 for himself, changed his name to William Desmond Taylor (from actor William Desmond and Taylor from his business partner, Arthur J. Taylor) and joined the traveling acting company of George Cleveland in New Jersey. In May 1909, possibly because he feared being found by his wife, he left for the Yukon to mine for gold (Higham 37).

While in the Yukon, he worked as a timekeeper and commissary comptroller, but when he did not discover any gold, he left to go to Vancouver and join yet another theater company. During the next few years, he traveled around the West doing odd-jobs and made multiple gold-mining trips to the Yukon and Telluride, Colorado. He never found

gold. A few biographers have written that director Thomas Ince saw Taylor acting in a play in San Francisco in 1913 and invited him to come to Los Angeles, while others find it more likely that Taylor merely heard there were actors needed in LA and went there on his own. In any case, Taylor came to Inceville in Santa Monica in 1913 where Ince paid him \$40 a week and put him to work immediately in a movie called *The Counterfeiters* (Higham 43).

Taylor began to be written about in the press almost immediately upon his arrival as is evidenced in this article from the trade magazine *Moving Picture World* from November 8, 1913:

William D. Taylor, the newly emerged leading man of the Vitagraph Western, is an actor of wide experience and of ever growing favor in the film world. An artist, clever and versatile, he has proved himself a valuable addition to a stock company, whose demands necessitate a wide variety of talents from its members...besides acting in the Western dramas, he will be cast for the leads in the Indian romances, the society and domestic plays and high comedies (Long 4).

Taylor hired a press agent and manager named Richard Willis from 1914-1915, and by early 1914, he had landed the starring role in Vitagraph's *Captain Alvarez* which garnered him even more regular publicity coverage as in this article from *Motography* on March 21, 1914:

William D. Taylor of the Vitagraph is doing notable work for the Western Vitagraph where his fine figure and strong expressive face stand him in good stead. He is at present playing the title role in CAPTAIN

ALVAREZ, opposite Edith Storey. The action takes place in the Argentine some fifty-five years back (Long 4).

From *New York Telegraph* on April 26, 1914:

William D. Taylor is the recipient of a particularly graceful tribute. A number of the “Extras” who appeared with him in the Vitagraph film CAPTAIN ALVAREZ clubbed together and presented him with a handsome Russian leather bookcase. Inside of which was a folded letter ‘To William Taylor, actor, good fellow and gentleman, who will always be thought of by the undersigned as ‘Captain Alvarez.’ This comes of treating every one, star and supe,⁵ alike (Long 5).

From *New York Telegraph* on April 24, 1914:

The closing attraction was CAPTAIN ALVAREZ ...At one point in the play he breaks away from a band of Federales who have captured him and on his favorite horse he dashes at full speed down a steep incline, and across a narrow hanging foot bridge, swaying over a deep ravine. It is one of the most daring feats of horsemanship that has ever been attempted for motion pictures, and William D. Taylor deserves full credit for the most stirring “stunt” seen in this city in many a day (Long 6).

From *The Clipper* on June 6, 1914:

William D. Taylor received a wire from a New York friend which runs ‘Congratulations, Billy, you have captured New York fans with your performance of Captain Alvarez. Prepare for requests for photographs,

⁵ Supe stand for supernumerary, or “extra”

you Irish lady killer.’ Taylor is Irish all right, but he objects to the appellation, ‘lady killer.’ He says he isn’t a lady killer, but—well he IS Irish! Lovers of dare devil riding can get their fill at the new Vitagraph show. Taylor is a wonder in the saddle (Long 7).

Whether Taylor actually received the gift from the “extras” on the set of *Captain Alvarez* or the above-mentioned letter from a New York friend or whether they were the fabrications of his publicity agent is not actually important because fans reading these articles would have believed them to be true and would have ‘read’ several things from this discourse. As we can see from the first article in 1913 where Taylor is discussed as having ‘wide experience,” his history as a long-time stage actor was used to lend an air of legitimacy to the start of his career as a film actor. This article also makes note of his intelligence and versatility enabling the studio to use him as a leading man in not only westerns, but in romances and society dramas as well. Audiences could interpret from the second article that Taylor was such an extraordinarily kind person to everyone on the movie set, be it a star or an extra, that his fellow actors bought him an expensive imported leather bookcase. And the description of the gift itself, expensive and exotic, connotes that he was a man of refined taste who also liked to read. The third article plays on the fact that Taylor did his own stunts, and readers would have appreciated that Taylor was both physically fit and daring enough to have put his own life at risk to create this thrilling scene for their own enjoyment. This article adds to the image of masculinity, physical discipline, courage, and commitment to his work that was being created around Taylor in this time period. The second article in which Taylor is depicted as having a “fine figure and a strong expressive face” and the fifth article which describes him as an

“Irish lady-killer” are deliberately used to establish Taylor as an object of sexual attraction. Taylor’s own alleged reaction to being called a “lady killer” has him both objecting to the term, but embracing it at the same time by saying he is Irish, and therefore automatically a “lady killer” because of his nationality. This could be somewhat of a mediating device on the part of his publicity agent because blunt sexuality in this early era of star discourse was not yet in favor. But what is suggested here is that Taylor, who was known for his serious demeanor in films, actually had another side to his “real-life” personality—a sense of humor. The article is also using stereotypical beliefs about Irish people—that they are sexually and humorously mischievous—to add another level of interest in Taylor’s star persona. And then to top it all off, the article is closed with the overtly sexual cliché that Taylor is “good in the saddle” which has the double connotation of being good in the bedroom as well as on a horse.

Many of the early articles on Taylor emphasize his masculine qualities, and this focus can be partly attributed to the time period in which Taylor worked. In her book *This Mad Masquerade*, film scholar Gaylyn Studlar sheds light on the focus on masculinity in this time period with her study of the construction of Douglas Fairbank’s stardom within the context of a cultural movement aimed at reforming “boy culture.” This movement, which saw the rise of the Boy Scouts, was an attempt at reforming the culture of masculinity and protecting it from a perceived “feminization” of society (Studlar 13). Fairbanks was a contemporary of William Desmond Taylor and consequently the same forces that shaped Fairbanks’s stardom would have influenced Taylor’s as well.

During an era marked by fears of national and masculine enfeeblement, Fairbank's stardom represented the fantasy of an adult attainment of many American reformers' perfected ideal of manhood, gracefully balancing moral gentility and primitive instincts, wilderness skills and genteel urbanity, boyish wanderlust and the promise of undemanding romance. Within this transitional period that led to the arrival of the Jazz Age, there was a veritable obsession with the attainment of masculinity (Studlar 13).

Within the quote above we can see the similarity to the written discourse on Taylor. The "moral gentility, wilderness skills, genteel urbanity, and boyish wanderlust" seem almost to be ripped from one of the publicist biographies on Taylor himself.

The year 1914 marked a big turning point for William Desmond Taylor. Barely in Los Angeles for a year, he was hired by the Balboa Studios of Long Beach to write, direct, and act in two to four-reel features. Several magazines and newspapers wrote about his successful career transition as a director.

From *Motography*, July 11, 1914:

William D. Taylor, late of the Vitagraph, who is quite a Broadway favorite by reason of his performance as CAPTAIN ALVAREZ, has made very good as a director at the Balboa studios. His first production, THE JUDGE'S WIFE, was so good that he was at once put on another three reeler BETTY [THE CRIMINAL CODE] with himself and Neva Gerber in the leads (Long 10).

From *Los Angeles Herald*, July 7, 1914:

William D. Taylor has amply proven his right to a director's position,

as his first two pictures have turned out big successes. It is no easy matter to direct and to act one's own leads, but Taylor not only does this, but is able to write a novel and stirring story. Since leaving the Vitagraph, where he did excellent work, Taylor's services have been in demand, and he has received tempting offers as a leading man, but he made up his mind to try his hand at the producing end (Long 10).

These news items served to inform Taylor's fans of two new things—that Taylor had successfully transitioned to directing and that, even though he was still being offered larger parts in feature films, he would most likely be focusing on a career as a director instead of as an actor. Taylor had obviously already made the decision to transition out of acting although he did play roles in the films he directed for Balboa. The focus of these articles is on Taylor's strong work ethic and his 'success' at it. Gaining the position of director showed that Taylor was moving up in the world of Hollywood.

From the *New York Telegraph*, August 30, 1914:

William D. Taylor is still at work on his EYE FOR AN EYE feature at the Balboa Studios, with Neva Gerber opposite himself. Taylor has made quite a hit with his productions and has taken his place among the successful directors (Long 12).

During this year, a more varied written discourse on Taylor began to appear including personal interviews, and more details about Taylor's past history. It is assumed that the coverage was provided to the magazines and newspapers by Taylor's press agent. This item from *Moving Picture World* detailing Taylor's history is almost complete

fabrication with bits of truth woven in, but again, Taylor's public would have taken the article as fact.

From *Moving Picture World*, October 3, 1914:

Taylor was born in Ireland and was educated at Clifton College, England, where he excelled in hurdles and rowing...he went to France and Germany to study languages and finally came to America and ranched it in Southwest Kansas. Returning to England he met Charles Hawtrey, the famous actor, and joined his company. After playing with a number of traveling companies William Taylor joined the Fanny Davenport acting company (Long 15).

Giving Taylor this upper class British education where he excelled at rowing and hurdles and studied languages in Europe would have served to paint a picture of his having come from a somewhat aristocratic background. Audiences would probably assume from this article that his family was quite well off financially. This would establish him as a well-bred European gentleman, something that Americans past and present have always held in high regard giving him an instant credibility with his audience. As was discussed in Chapter 2, star discourse began to legitimize itself by aligning with the star system of the theater. Many early stars were discussed in terms of their previous experience on the stage, and Taylor is no exception here. Audiences would have been very familiar with the name of Charles Hawtrey who had a famous theatrical touring company based in England, and Fanny Davenport who both had famous touring company based out of Chicago. Associating Taylor with these two names lent credibility

to his new career as screen actor and director. The last lines of the article again reiterate that Taylor can be read as the 1910's equivalent of a sex symbol.

William Taylor is very much of a man, athletic, tall and well built. He has an all-round love of sports and is as fond of visiting the theater as ever. He is a prominent member of the Photo-players Club, a general favorite and an excellent dresser (Long 15).

Although probably somewhat obvious and even absurd by today's standards of star discourse, this writing is working very hard to establish just how well rounded Taylor is. He is not only good looking and into fitness, but he is cultured because he goes to the theater, and he is well liked by his peers in the Photo-players Club.

Writing was a popular form of written star discourse in the Silent era. Mary Pickford had a daily newspaper column for a time as well. In January 1915, one of Taylor's first interviews appeared in *Motion Picture* magazine. The article is alleged to be a direct quote from Taylor, but judging from the over-written style, was probably prepared by Taylor's publicist like the other pieces. The difference, for fans, would have been significant, though, because writing directly from the star himself would probably have been taken as somehow more truthful, and fans could feel like they were getting to know their favorite star on a more personal level.

I entered the pictures as a sort of compromise. I had made several attempts to get away from the stage...as I did not fancy the small and stuffy dressing rooms and the continual study, I came to the Coast and deliberately tried to get into the Motion Picture game...now I am at Long Beach, directing and acting with the Balboa Company. So I can still get

my ride, woo nature, with her ever-changing scenes, and go for my swim and enjoy the strong sea air (Long 14).

Here Taylor shares an intimate story about why he wanted to leave the stage and work in the movies instead—because in the movies, you can work outdoors, which is so much more healthy and refreshing than a ‘stuffy’ theater. This is a perfect example of how star discourse was being used not only to promote stars, but to promote movie-going as well. This writing argues that if the work that the stars are doing is wholesome and healthy, then going to the movies to see them is a wholesome and healthy activity. Here Taylor talks about how he can direct a movie, ride a horse, enjoy a swim, and take in the great outdoors all at once. This is also a good example of how star discourse began to distance itself from the theater performers because many theater stars were associated with scandal. Whereas, the historical article on Taylor legitimizes him using his theater background, the interview shows Taylor distancing himself from his theatrical past and promoting the movies as a healthier activity.

In 1914, Taylor left the Balboa Studios to join Carlyle Blackwell’s Favorite Player’s Company. The films were made at the Norbig studios in Edendale (Long 17). After his move to Favorite Player’s, Taylor was solely a director. The first film he made there was called *The Last Chapter*. With this film, Taylor began to establish himself as a director who tried to incorporate realistic detail in his filmmaking.

From *The Clipper*, December 19, 1914:

THE LAST CHAPTER is ready to be cut and assembled, and should be one of the pictures of the year... A Zulu village of kraals was built by the side of a stream, and the South African scenes were put on with the help of

a man who was born and lived in Africa, and who won distinction during several of the native up-risings there. William D. Taylor has reason to be proud of the first picture he has produced for the Favorite Players Company (Long 19).

Taylor directed one other feature called THE HIGH HAND for Favorite Player's before it went out of business in the Spring of 1915. He kept himself busy for a few months by directing and starring in a Los Angeles benefit production of the play *Damon and Pythias* (Long 26). By April of 1915 he was hired by the American Film Manufacturing Company in Santa Barbara.⁶ He directed a few one and two reelers before he was hired to take over for another director on an epic 30-part serial called *The Diamond From the Sky*.

Having served as a director for only one year, it is a testament to the faith that Taylor inspired in others, that he was given the opportunity to direct such a massive under-taking as to endure five months of location shooting with live animals and a few thousand extras. *The Diamond From the Sky* also marked Taylor's first job directing a full-fledged star. Lottie Pickford, sister of Mary Pickford was the star of the serial, and she proved to be a challenge for Taylor as well. Pickford chose not to reveal the fact that she was pregnant when she was hired, and Taylor had to spend time carefully choreographing her scenes so that her pregnancy would not be visible (Long 43).

From the *New York Telegraph*, June 20, 1915:

William D. Taylor (Bill)—the man who never says “can't”—is director of THE DIAMOND FROM THE SKY. It takes a man like Taylor to make a

⁶ American Film Mfg. was also known as Flying A Studios because of its logo which was an 'A' with wings.

stupendous thing like DIAMOND a big success. There is only one man like Taylor in the business...He comes of good old Irish stock...The dominant note of DIAMOND is adventure. William D. Taylor was able to direct the great adventure scenes in DIAMOND because he has been and is today, an adventurer. He has been prospecting in the Klondike; he has ridden the range in the Argentine...(Long 32).

Taylor's Irish ancestry and past history as a gold-miner are used to promote both him and the adventure aspect of *The Diamond From the Sky*. Taylor's time in the Klondike would have seemed extremely adventurous and exotic to American audiences and it made Taylor seem like the perfect person to direct this serial. "The man who never says can't" indicates a determination and ambition on Taylor's part to begin tackling bigger film projects.

In the autumn of 1915, announcements began to appear that Taylor was leaving the American Film Company to direct movies for Pallas Pictures.⁷ Because Bosworth, Pallas, and Morosco films were all released by Paramount, this move represented the beginning of Taylor's association with that company (Long 43).

From the *New York Telegraph*, October 31, 1915:

When William D. Taylor left the American company to direct Pallas pictures here was weeping and wailing among the members of THE DIAMOND FROM THE SKY cast. Mr. Taylor was given a farewell dinner at one of the local restaurants and presented with an immense

⁷ Bosworth, Inc. was originally founded by actor Hobart Bosworth and Frank A. Garbutt, but Bosworth left the company in early 1915, and the name was changed to Pallas Pictures.

loving cup by Lottie Pickford, who played the lead in the serial. Miss Pickford also wrote a song for the occasion (Long 41).

This discourse serves to show how well loved and admired Taylor was by his peers. *The Diamond From the Sky* proved to be a very successful directorial effort for him, but it must have been thoroughly exhausting because several press accounts reported that he needed to some time away from Hollywood to recuperate.

From the *Santa Barbara Press*, October 10, 1915:

Director William D. Taylor leaves this morning for Arrowhead, and will enjoy the springs a week before taking up his new work at Bosworths (Long 42).

From *Movie Pictorial*, December 1915:

William D. Taylor has settled down to the work of directing for Bosworth, Inc., and will produce Pallas pictures. After his struggles with THE DIAMOND FROM THE SKY, Mr. Taylor took mud baths and a long rest. He is once more “full of pep” (Long 43).

Once again, this type of writing serves a few different purposes. It is an announcement of Taylor’s move to Bosworth, it is keeping him in the public spotlight during his break from directing, and it is promoting Taylor’s and Hollywood’s healthfulness by high-lighting that he works very hard, but like everyone else, he needs a nice relaxing break in a healthful soothing atmosphere once in awhile. Taking spa treatments would probably have seemed very exotic and interesting to Taylor’s audiences as well and would have shown his elegant and refined taste.

In Richard Dyer's *Stars*, Dyer discusses how American actors have represented the values of the American Dream which is divided into four ideals—the dignity of the common individual, democracy as the guarantee of freedom and quality, the gospel of hard work, and the belief in material progress (Dyer 25). The written discourse on Taylor here and in almost all of the writing on him before his death imbues him with these values repeatedly and paints a portrait of someone who is achieving the American Dream. He came to this country, alone, and totally unknown with no one to give him a leg up making him the common but dignified individual. By submitting himself to the democratic ideals of this country and practicing the gospel of hard work through odd jobs, acting, and finally directing, he built a solid reputation for himself, and could now enjoy the material success he had earned. He was essentially everything that America valued in the 1920's. The rugged masculine individualist who had pulled himself up by his own bootstraps.

1915 also marked the beginning of Taylor's association with the MPDA (Motion Picture Director's Association), an organization to which Taylor was extremely dedicated until he died. He served as the Los Angeles chapter's president for three terms. Unlike the modern Director's Guild of America, the MPDA was not a trade union but a social, fraternal, and lobbying organization. Among the MPDA's duties were "to cultivate the usefulness and exert every influence to improve moral, social, and intellectual standing of all persons connected with the motion picture producing business" (Long 50). It is interesting to note that an organization concerned with the 'moral standing' of film employees existed during the Silent era. This is evidence that even before the star scandals of the 1920's, Hollywood was well aware of the importance of image control

and public perception. Taylor is listed as an attendee at the announcement for MPDA's first ball. He was in good company. D.W. Griffith and Mack Sennett were also listed as attendees.

From the *Motion Picture News*, December 18, 1915:

The most brilliant social function in the history of the Los Angeles film producing colony, was the first annual ball and grand buffet given by the Motion Picture Director's Association, Thanksgiving evening, at the ball room of Hotel Alexandria, Los Angeles. The attendance numbered more than three hundred and fifty, and included many of the principal people engaged in the film industry here (Long 49).

The discourse on Taylor's involvement with the MPDA showed that he had become an important member of the Hollywood film community. It was proof that he had strong leadership skills and had earned enough respect from his directing colleagues to be elected as the voice of this important industry organization for three terms.

In December of 1915, a long article written by Taylor's publicist, Richard Willis, for *Movie Pictorial* appeared. In it, Taylor's history in Ireland and as a film actor are again discussed as well as his quick rise to fame as a director. What is most interesting about the article, however, is the inclusion of a poem written by Taylor. The poem is included in its entirety here because out of all the written discourse on Taylor, it is the most personal thing that he ever revealed about his private life, and the only time that he alluded to the difficulties in his past.

Man, do you KNOW, have you FELT and SEEN;
In the wastes of the earth have your footsteps been;
Have you tasted the salt, the deserts trod;
Forsaken all else, forgotten your God

At the beck and call of a woman's nod;
Have you walked the paths that are mean?

Have you eaten the sweets and spat the gall;
Has your heart beat high at the wanderlust call;
Had rope in hand or gun in fist;
Been cursed and loved and beaten and missed;
And slept where the wind your brow has kissed;
Have you fought with your back to the wall?

E'en so, and from fate you never ran,
Tho' held 'neath narrow society's ban;
Ne'er taken an innocent girl in tow;
Nor lied nor struck a fallen foe?
Then you have FELT and SEEN and KNOW;
And you'll die as you've lived—a MAN.

This type of discourse is a bit risky for Taylor. It paints the picture of a man with an unhappy past and a lonely inner life—not the type of thing that stars were eager to promote. For Taylor, it is shockingly revealing considering that he guarded his past history and private life very closely. It is impossible to know how audiences of the time interpreted it, but they would not have been surprised by the references to his traveling past because Taylor's trip to the Klondike was a well-publicized part of his persona. Perhaps, though, they were a bit taken aback by the gritty reality of the violence and the homelessness alluded to here. Even though the person speaking in the poem seems very courageous, noble, heroic, and driven, things that were well in-line with Taylor's established persona, he also seems to be doing battle against some unknown force. The line "Tho' held 'neath narrow society's ban" in particular invites interpretation. Taylor seems to be saying he has been held back by society's narrow thinking about something. Given that the writing on Taylor had never before suggested anything like this, audiences of the time were probably met with total confusion over this line. Looking at the poem from a modern perspective, "narrow society's ban" could be referring to Taylor's life as a

theater actor and dealing with the low opinion that society held for the profession, but it could also be referring to Taylor's sexuality and the impossibility of living life as openly homosexual in the 1910's. This possibility was made even more likely by the discovery of the unpublished memoirs of George Hopkins who claimed to have been Taylor's lover for seven years.⁸ In this context, the line finally makes sense, but audiences of the time did not have access to this information, and in fact, Taylor's written discourse served to point in the exact opposite direction of homosexuality. Even this poem refers to relationships with women. The overall reading of the poem is that Taylor seems to have been a very lonely person who felt he was misunderstood in some fashion, and yet, because he has been called to do something in life, he perseveres. Despite some somewhat risky revelations it still exudes the very American ideals of heroism, masculinity, singularity of purpose, and courage in the face of adversity.

The year 1916 was a very busy one for Taylor. He directed nine films for Hobart Bosworth, Pallas Pictures, and the Oliver Morosco Photoplay Company—*He Fell in Love With His Wife*, *Ben Blair*, *Pasquale*, *The American Beauty*, *Davy Crockett*, *The Parson of Panamint*, *The House of Lies*, *Her Father's Son*, and *Redeeming Love*. The writer for three of these films was Julia Crawford Ivers with whom Taylor became a very close collaborator. He chose her to write most of the scripts that he directed for Paramount. Despite all his seeming success at his new company, several articles announced that Taylor had accepted a new deal with Fox.

From *Moving Picture World*, November 25, 1916:

⁸ Hopkins' memoir *Caught in the Act*, written in 1981, was used as a primary source for Charles Higham's book on Taylor entitled *Murder in Hollywood*.

William D. Taylor has closed a deal with William Fox whereby he will finish one more picture for the Morosco Company and then go to the Fox studio to produce pictures (Long 61).

It seems that two of Taylor's main actors, Dustin Farnum and Winifred Kingston, wanted to move to Fox, but they would not go unless Fox also signed their favorite director, Taylor, so all three made a deal to move (Long 63). There is notable lack of written discourse on Taylor's time at Fox, and while there is no direct indication of conflict, we can infer from what does exist that things did not go well for him there. While various articles credited him with directing Dustin Farnum in *North of Fifty-Three* (1917), the official directing credit was given to Richard Stanton. By February of 1917 the *Los Angeles Herald* announced that Taylor had resigned as director at Fox, and by March the newspapers announced that Taylor had returned to Morosco which had merged with Paramount in 1916 (Long 61).

From the *New York Telegraph*, March 25, 1917:

Director William H. [sic] Taylor, who was at the Fox studio with Dustin Farnum for one picture, has returned to the Morosco studio and will shortly begin work on a new production which will feature House Peters and Myrtle Stedman (Long 67).

Despite his evidently difficult experience at Fox, Taylor was back to work at Paramount where he would remain for the rest of his career, and he was directing, Wallace Reid,⁹ one of Paramount's biggest stars and a big box office draw in this time

⁹ After the Taylor murder scandal in 1922, Wallace Reid died of a drug addiction in 1923. Reid's death is the third of the big three Hollywood scandals of the 1920's.

period. Taylor's name linked with Reid's would have been noticed by Taylor's fans and it indicated that his brief trouble at Fox had not hurt his career in the least.

From the *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 1917:

Kathlyn Williams and Wallace Reid, with their company under the direction of William H. [sic] Taylor, of the Morosco studio, have departed for Fort Bragg, Cal., there to take a number of the lumber camp scenes for the forthcoming production in they will be co-starred (Long 67).

In September of 1917, Taylor began shooting *Tom Sawyer* with Mary Pickford's brother, Jack Pickford, in the role of Tom. Taylor would eventually direct all three of the members of the famous Pickford acting family. The Pickford name had a tremendous amount of marquee value, and the fact that Taylor was working with them would have indicated to fans that he had "made it big" in Hollywood.

From the *New York Telegraph*, September 23, 1917:

There is a tense atmosphere in St. Petersburg (Mo.). The natives of the town are up in arms...All owing to the fact that Jack Pickford and company recently visited the town of St. Petersburg, stayed long enough to film some scenes for TOM SAWYER, and then, like the Arabs, folded their tents and stole silently away. William D. Taylor took the company to the village, but no one found it out...For years they have been trooping to the Bijou Dream to see Jack and his sister, Mary, in the celluloid. Then the former appeared in the flesh—and they missed him (Long 70).

This discourse is evidence of how creative studio publicists had become at promoting films. The purported "scandal" in St. Petersburg was likely created to stir up

excitement for the news that Taylor was bringing a version of Mark Twain's American classic to the screen, and a public controversy would have been much more exciting for readers than just a straight publicity announcement. Most importantly we can see that by this time Taylor's name attached to a project was just as important in publicity as the name of the famous leading actor, Jack Pickford. Taylor made six other films for Morosco/Paramount in 1917: *Happiness of Three Women*, *Out of the Wreck*, *The World Apart*, *Big Timber*, and *Jack and Jill*. In 1918, Taylor finally got the chance to direct Mary Pickford, herself in two new films.

From the *New York Telegraph*, June 23, 1918:

William D. Taylor has been about the busiest man in the Coast film colony during this past week. Besides cutting his latest Mary Pickford feature, CAPTAIN KIDD JR., Taylor is directing Mary in THE MOBILIZATION OF JOHANNE [JOHANNA ENLISTS], as well as working on affairs of the Motion Picture Directors' Association, of which he is director. It is no wonder that Taylor isn't seen at the Los Angeles Athletic Club these days (Long 85).

This significance of Taylor's name linked with Mary Pickford's in this discourse cannot be underestimated. It is widely acknowledged that Pickford's stardom was on a scale previously unheard of before or since this time period. While Taylor was already a well-known figure on his own terms, directing Pickford certainly must have solidified his standing in the public's view. Not only was he directing Hollywood's biggest stars but he was working for Paramount—Hollywood's most successful studio in this era. Despite his tremendous success, Taylor would make a somewhat baffling decision in 1918.

Even though the film industry had won a petition to have its most essential American workers exempt from the draft for WWI, William Desmond Taylor, 46 years old, responded to Great Britain's request for any eligible British citizens living overseas to enlist in the army in the summer of 1918. Despite newspaper reports to the contrary, Taylor did not see any active duty in the war. He was sent to Camp Fort Edward, in Windsor, Nova Scotia, Canada where he rose rapidly through the ranks, put on camp vaudeville shows and commanded a black Caribbean regiment in training (Higham 55). A few articles announced his departure for the war, but many more were written upon his return to the US in May 1919.

From the *Los Angeles Herald*, July 9, 1918:

William D. Taylor, director for Mary Pickford and president of the Moving Picture Director's association has enlisted in the British army and leaves for London in two weeks Mr. Taylor is one of the best known directors in the business and his loss will be felt in film circles (Long 87).

From *Photoplay*, October 1918:

William D. Taylor, Mary Pickford's director, gave up his \$25,000 a year and sailed from New York to enlist in the British Army (Long 89).

The somewhat amazed tone of this *Photoplay* article reveals that, *Photoplay's* writers, at least, were a bit confused over Taylor's decision to enlist. At 46, he was well beyond the usual enlistment age, the war was almost over by the time he joined, and he was at the height of his directing career in Hollywood. We can only infer that Taylor's decision was based on a personal desire to be of service in some way. It would be absurd

to think it was solely to boost his image because he was already one of the best publicized figures in Hollywood. From the written discourse after his return, we can see the writing fully capitalized on Taylor's war service while also announcing his return to work and promoting his next film.

From the *Los Angeles Times*, May 15, 1919:

Arriving in town last night also via the Santa Fe was no less a person than Capt. William D. Taylor, of the British Army, who has been away over a year, and who saw active service in France. He looked just too handsome for anything in his uniform, but within a few days he is to doff it for the plain business suit of the picture director and start the other sort of "shooting" on the Lasky lot. Capt. Taylor is one of the best-known directors in the business (Long 92).

From the *Los Angeles Herald*, May 20, 1919:

William D. Taylor, who recently returned from France as an officer in the American [sic] army, is out at the Morosco studio putting on a film version of HUCKLEBERRY FINN. Taylor, who is handling the megaphone, has requested Jessie Hallett, casting director, to send out an S.O.S. for characters (Long 92).

Most of what was written about Taylor's war service is a fabrication. Taylor's true activities during WWI were covered in the press only after his death. We can only assume Taylor's publicist thought it was more in-line with Taylor's established persona to write that Taylor saw active duty on the European war front. Writing the truth, that

Taylor instead staged vaudeville shows and commanded a company of black men, in Canada would not have fit with this persona and might have been an embarrassment for him. In any event, what was written about his service would only have reinforced the already-established image the public had of Taylor as being extremely masculine, patriotic, and heroic.

From the *New York Telegraph*, June 1, 1919:

...About a year ago Mr. Taylor went across the Atlantic in mufti¹⁰ to enter the British service...he enlisted as a “Tommy” in the Royal Fusiliers. Then he was transferred to the Royal Army Service Corps and commissioned lieutenant. He served in Flanders and was the second officer to enter Lille after the Germans evacuated the city. He also reached Cologne and other German points and spent some time in London before returning to this country a few weeks ago (Long 94).

Taylor’s first project after his return was the film adaptation of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1920). He auditioned hundreds of boys for the lead, and eventually settled on a young and relatively unknown 15 year-old actor named Lewis Sargent. The movie played to packed houses and received excellent reviews.

From the *Los Angeles Times*, February 9, 1920:

Have no fear, “Huckleberry Finn” as you see him at Grauman’s Rialto, is the exact boy of your dreams. Indeed, the freckle-faced lively little Lewis Sargent seems never to have been born, but just to have been made to order to play the resourceful Huck, with his peculiar boy’s philosophy and

¹⁰ Mufti means civilian attire or ordinary street clothes as opposed to military dress.

his talent for getting into adventure, and who when there is no adventure, manufactures one with the aid of his pal, Tom Sawyer (Kingsley 12).

After *Huckleberry Finn*, Taylor started work on another famous literary adaptation---*Anne of Green Gables* (1919) starring a young 17 year-old actress named Mary Miles Minter. Minter established her career as a famous child actor on the stage. Mary Pickford had recently left Paramount which was a major blow for the studio. The significance of this event is indicated by the fact that Paramount studio head, Adolph Zukor, himself, is included in this discourse. It is also the first time that Zukor's name is mentioned in association with Taylor's. Zukor, was hoping to turn Mary, with her fresh youthful looks and curly blonde ringlets, the look patented by Mary Pickford, into Paramount's next big star.

From the *New York Telegraph*, July 11, 1919:

Miss Minter's work was delayed two weeks to get the particular director and scenario writer that Mr. Zukor wished associated with the young star on her initial vehicle. Hence the announcement that William D. Taylor, the director desired, has been signed and is coming on from the Coast to take the reins next Monday. As announced yesterday, Frances Marion is the scenario writer selected by Mr. Zukor for this work (Long 100).

Given Zukor's big plans for Minter and her future Paramount, the appointment of Taylor as the director for all of her projects during her three year contract with Paramount shows how much faith Zukor had in Taylor's abilities. The hiring of Frances Marion, one of the top screenwriters of the era, also shows just how much effort Zukor was putting behind launching Minter's career. Although no actress could equal the success of

Mary Pickford, Minter in *Anne of Green Gables* was a success, and Taylor directed Mary Miles Minter in three other films—*Judy of Rogue's Harbor* (1920), *Nurse Marjorie* (1920), and *Jenny Be Good* (1920). Although he was supposed to direct all twenty of the films Minter was to make for Paramount under her contract, he only ended up directing four. In 1919, Taylor signed a new contract with Paramount that gave him his own production unit and top billing. Because Minter, herself, was to receive top billing as well because of her own contract, they never made any more films together (Long 122).

From the *Los Angeles Herald*, December 8, 1919:

William D. Taylor, one of the screen's best known and most artistic directors has signed a new contract with Famous Players-Lasky whereby he will make his own productions for the Paramount-Artcraft program. Films directed and produced by Taylor will be trademarked "William D. Taylor Productions" and will be given the same prominence and publicity that now is given those of Cecil B. DeMille (Long 117).

This discourse is significant in that it announces that Taylor had now achieved the highest ranking that any director, even Cecil B. DeMille, ever received—top billing. Artcraft, also known as RealArt was Taylor's own banner under which he would produce the last films of his career.

In *Stars*, Richard Dyer discusses Hollywood and the "myth of success." "The general meaning of the myth of success is that American society is sufficiently open for anyone to get to the top, regardless of rank" (42). This myth denies the existence of the class system in America and is exemplified in legends created for fan magazines such as the one where actresses were discovered at the soda fountain at Schwab's drugstore.

Particularly as developed in the star system, the success myth tries to orchestrate several contradictory elements: that ordinariness is the hallmark of the star; that the system rewards talent and ‘specialness’; that luck, ‘breaks’, which may happen to anyone typify the career of the star; and that hard work and professionalism are necessary for stardom (Dyer 42).

Within the writing on Taylor, we can see that success is one of the predominant themes. Taylor’s discourse often pointed out his hard work and professionalism, and he was also considered ‘special’ with some articles even calling him a genius.

In 1919, Taylor was quoted in several articles on a debate that began when a few film studios, including Famous Players-Lasky, began building new sound studios in New York leading newspapers to speculate on whether the film industry would move back eastward where it had initially started. While the production side of the business had largely moved to Southern California, the business side was still largely based in New York City. Both Taylor and Cecil B. DeMille spoke adamantly about their intent to remain in the West. This is the first time that Taylor is portrayed as being outspoken on an openly political debate within in the industry.

From the *Los Angeles Herald*, October 29, 1919:

“I was almost three months making one picture in the east this summer and autumn,”¹¹ said Mr. Taylor. “It was a film which would ordinarily have taken five to six weeks, and the delay was caused by the excessive amount of rain. Exteriors which were absolutely essential just couldn’t be

¹¹ Taylor is referring to *Anne of Green Gables* which was shot on the East coast instead of the West coast.

obtained..The contrast to a director who has had the advantage of California's brilliant sunshine and stable weather is almost impossible to imagine, and for me there is absolutely no comparison as to the desirability of the west (Long 107).

From the *Los Angeles Express*, December 13, 1919:

“Again I say that the west is the place for motion picture production and that the east will never be able to compete in this regard with the stable conditions of California and its immense superiorities in scenic and other ways.” Thus did William Desmond Taylor, the Realart director, give forth an I-told-you-so the other day with no apparent satisfaction in having called the turn (Long 114).

This discourse on Taylor demonstrates that by this point in time, Taylor had become a respected authority on the film industry, a person whose opinion was valued enough to seek out his point of view on an important debate concerning the future location of the industry. That Taylor was not afraid to publicly take a side in this debate also shows that he had gained some power of his own in the industry. Clearly he felt his position at Paramount was solid enough to take this risk.

During the last four years of his career from 1919-1922, Taylor did many interviews about his own working methods and his opinions about what makes good cinema. This discourse is markedly different from previous writing in that it does not seem to serve only promotional purposes. In this article, Taylor gives his opinion on what he feels are the crucial elements in making a good film, but he also makes a

prediction here, one that would come true—that the art of screenwriting would take on a greater significance in the cinema.

From the *Los Angeles Express*, December 17, 1919:

Three elements enter into the making of a perfect photoplay—story, direction, and star. The author of tomorrow is going to become one of our greatest factors in picture creation. . . . Give the public real, human pictures with hearts in them and life and love and passion and pathos—yes, and comedy—and the public will rise up and call you blessed (Long 117).

In these articles, Taylor really gets a chance to show his true passion for his work. As a former actor, himself, and a director who obviously liked to work with actors, Taylor did several articles on the art of acting in the cinema. While D.W. Griffith is largely credited with bringing a more naturalistic acting style to the cinema, this writing reveals that Taylor was working to achieve this as well.

From the *Los Angeles Record*, May 15, 1920:

“Curing actors of acting!” Yes, we have to do that occasionally in moving pictures...we must eliminate every move that does not count for something in an interpretive sense...Personally I explain every scene to my players, show them the sequence of the action. Then they “walk through” a rehearsal, illustrating their ideas of how the scene should go. Then it’s “Camera!” and they films the parts according to their own ideas. When the picture is completed I feel I have a living, human element(Long 130).

This new discourse on Taylor, largely contributed to by Taylor, himself, had risen beyond the usual publicity “puff pieces.” Because Taylor had now been directing for nearly eight years, and was already an established figure in Hollywood, this writing no longer needed to incorporate the dualistic intent of “selling” Taylor to an audience with references to his attractiveness, sex appeal, intelligence, or Irish heritage. Taylor was now free to write his true feelings about what makes good cinema, and about the expertise he had gained while working in this profession. It is obvious from this writing that Taylor regarded film work as a highly collaborative process speaking as he does with such admiration for the professions of acting and writing. Having directed several adaptations of popular works of American literature, Taylor could now speak with experience on the challenges of bringing well-known books to the screen. Of all the writing on Taylor, these articles give us the clearest picture of the working habits and artistic ideals of a man who was coming into his own as a director.

From the *Los Angeles Examiner*, August 29, 1920:

Follow the book as far as possible within limitations! Briefly, that is my idea of the correct procedure in transforming a notable story for screen use. When it becomes necessary to make alterations they should be simple and of a sort that will enhance dramatic values without destroying story beauty....Above all one must be sure to fix accurately on the screen the true philosophy of the story. That is the author's greatest gift to humanity and it must not suffer loss in any way (Long 143).

Even before the Fatty Arbuckle scandal began to make headlines in September of 1921, a number of articles show that Hollywood was faced with yet another growing

ensorship movement. In late 1920, Eastern reformers had begun trying to pass “blue laws” also known as “the closed Sunday movement” which would have prohibited the nationwide exhibition of movies on Sundays (Long 169). Articles show that Taylor along with several other Hollywood filmmakers were beginning to speak out in the press against this move. Like the previous discourse in which Taylor publicly opposed the industry’s move to the east coast, this discourse once again showed that public that Taylor was a leading voice in the industry now defending Hollywood against censorship.

From the *Los Angeles Herald*, December 17, 1920:

In separate meetings the writers and directors of the motion picture colony have pledged themselves to fight the national blue-law Sunday program of Eastern reformers. William D. Taylor, Paramount director, introduced a resolution condemning the closed Sunday movement at the meeting last night of the Motion Picture Director’s association in the Hollywood Women’s club house. Taylor, who heads the anti-blue-law fight in the West, was named by Vice President Frank Lloyd to prepare a letter to the national association of the motion picture industry (Long 168).

Dedicated to the fight against blue laws, Taylor wrote a letter asking all branches of the film community’s workforce to unite for this battle.

From the *Los Angeles Herald*, February 16, 1921:

The necessity of immediate and united action on the part of the motion picture industry to defend itself against legislative menaces of censorship and so-called ‘Blue Laws’ is recognized by every member of our industry. Our motion picture trade publications are urging united and unselfish

action of every one connected with producing, distributing and exhibiting of motion pictures to defend this great industry against those who would weaken and destroy it (Long 184).

As previously stated, star discourse worked to not only promote the stars' moral health but also to promote the moral health of Hollywood in general. The article below is one of Taylor's only direct statements on the moral health of Hollywood. In it, he is arguing that Hollywood does not make immoral movies because they do not make any money so there is no need for censorship. Taylor's statement would have reflected to an audience that he was probably a person of high moral fiber if he was concerned with Hollywood's morality. This is significant because just one year later, after he was murdered, the discourse on him would describe him as completely immoral.

From the *Los Angeles Herald*, February 25, 1921:

It is not good business, aside from the question of ethics, for a producer to make unclean pictures," said Taylor. "In the early days some foolish producers thought otherwise but the ultimate failure of their productions drove home the truth that family trade is at the basis of the motion picture industry. Father will not bring mother and the kids to a dirty photoplay.

Hence the censorship ban is entirely unnecessary (Long 186).

After the events in San Francisco in early September 1921, the threat of blue laws would be the least of Hollywood's concerns. That month, Fatty Arbuckle was arrested for the rape and murder of Virginia Rappe, and several Hollywood stars, including Taylor, were asked for their comments on the case and the perceived repercussions for the industry.

From the *Los Angeles Herald*, September 13, 1921:

William D. Taylor: “It is not for me to judge the merits of the case at hand, but I do deeply deplore the insinuations which have been cast on the profession as a whole. The irreproachable characters of the majority will stand the acid test even of the muck-rakers (Long 231).

Of course Taylor had no way of knowing that his own character would be one of the “acid tests” and that it would ultimately fail. After *Anne of Green Gables*, Taylor directed nine more movies for Paramount. Two of his films, *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Soul of Youth*, were listed among the forty best films of 1920 by the National Board of Review. He was one of only three directors to have more than one film make the board’s list that year (Long 187). The excerpt below is from *Why is a Motion Picture Director*, one of the last articles Taylor wrote before he was found dead in his apartment in February 1922. In it Taylor speaks passionately about the profession that he obviously loved.

From the *Los Angeles Record*, October 1, 1921:

A thinker who is not afraid of work and who knows what he is doing...no matter whether he begins as actor, author, assistant director, or cinematographer—who becomes the real director. More and more does the director tend to become a producer, arranging for finances, making his own picture in his own way and at his own risk; making pictures because he loves it, not because he can draw a good salary for making them...he is becoming more and more an individualist, an interpreter of ideas, a molder (Long 240).

The written discourse on Taylor throughout his career from 1913 to 1922 created him as a star dedicated to his work, to protecting his country in wartime, and to defending Hollywood against censorship. He was greatly admired by his peers and held up as a pillar of the Hollywood community who made 'clean' pictures for the whole family. But the written discourse of the 1920's had changed from the previous decade. More and more newspapers and fan magazines were printing articles about previously taboo subjects such as stars' divorces, affairs, and financial difficulties. William Randolph Hearst had established a large chain of nationwide newspapers and the news of any scandal could be broadcast in headlines nationwide in only a matter of hours. After he was murdered sometime in the evening hours of February 1, 1922, the written discourse that had established Taylor as a star would be used to cast a shadow of doubt upon him and the entire Hollywood film community and forever change the way the world viewed him.

Chapter 4: Murder and Myth

At approximately 7:30am on the morning of February 2, 1922, Henry Peavey, William Desmond Taylor's valet, arrived at 404-B South Alvarado to find Taylor lying on his back fully clothed in his previous day's attire on his living room floor. He called Taylor's name and receiving no response, he ran into the bungalow court screaming for Taylor's neighbors. Someone called police, but in the meantime, several of Taylor's neighbors entered his apartment. The first police to arrive at the scene were Deputy Sheriff Francis J. Wallis, Sergeant of Detectives Thomas A. Zeigler, and Lieutenant Fred R. Parsons all from the First Street Homicide Division (Higham 92). A man claiming to be a doctor pronounced Taylor dead from a stomach hemorrhage or a coronary, but no one took note of the man's name so he could not be found for questioning later. It was not until Deputy Coroner William MacDonald and Paramount general manager, Charles Eyton both arrived and rolled Taylor's body over to discover a single bullet wound, that anyone suspected that Taylor had been murdered. The police report stated that Charles Eyton asked to be allowed to go through Taylor's possessions and remove any letters that might prove damaging to Taylor. Eyton then asked a studio employee to take the letters to his office and lock them up. George James Hopkins would later write in his unpublished 1981 memoir, *Caught in the Act: A Memoir*, that Taylor had been his lover for seven years and that he was the employee that Eyton asked to remove the letters from Taylor's apartment that day. Hopkins wrote that he did as Eyton had requested and moved the letters to a locked cabinet at Paramount.

By the time the coroner's wagon arrived to take the body away, reporters were swarming the courtyard. They questioned any of Taylor's neighbors who would talk to

them. Taylor's next-door neighbor, the Paramount director, Charles Maigne, told them about Taylor's former valet, Edward Sands, who had robbed Taylor and stolen his car while Taylor was away in Europe six months earlier. Detectives told the reporters about a woman's hairpin found lodged in Taylor's bedroom carpet and revealed that Taylor had autographed pictures from several actresses including Mabel Normand and Mary Miles Minter (Higham 98). Sergeant of Detectives, William M. Cahill found a pink nightgown in Taylor's dresser drawer. The nightgown, a small woman's handkerchief with the initials M.M.M, and letters from Mary Miles Minter were taken by police as evidence. Later the existence of the nightgown was leaked to the press.

Police questioned Taylor's neighbors about whether they had seen or heard anything the previous evening. Most of them had nothing to report, but Taylor's neighbors to the east, Douglas and Faith MacLean, said they thought they might have heard a gunshot, but they were not sure if it was just a car backfiring. At first, Faith MacLean said the noise happened around 9pm but later she said it was between 7:05pm and 7:30pm. Police knew from Henry Peavey's statement that Mabel Normand was at Taylor's home between 7:00 and 7:30, but she could not have killed him because neighbors had seen Taylor walking Normand to her car between 7:30 and 8:00pm. MacLean went on to say that she had gone to her doorway after hearing the sound and had seen a man of medium height, wearing a plaid cap and a muffler standing in Taylor's doorway as if he was speaking to Taylor. The man walked toward her and then turned and walked out of the apartment complex in the direction of the trolley stop. She did not think anything of it at the time because the man did not behave suspiciously. Police also questioned both actresses Mabel Normand and Mary Miles Minter. Normand had an

alibi provided by her maid that she was home all evening after she left Taylor's apartment, and Minter had an alibi provided by her sister and grandmother that she was home all evening as well. There was a gun in the house, but it belonged to Taylor and had not been fired recently. No murder weapon or spent shell casings were found at the scene. There is no record that police ever dusted for fingerprints. The motive for the crime did not seem to be robbery because none of the cash or expensive jewelry in Taylor's apartment had been taken. Edward Sands, because he had robbed Taylor's home and subsequently disappeared, became the strongest suspect and by February 3, the police began a nationwide search for him. The first articles to surface in the national newspapers on February 3 reported the known facts of the crime, who police had questioned and who, if anyone, might be suspects. Jesse Lasky and Charles Eyton both expressed their sorrows in this article from the *Los Angeles Times* on February 3.

From all quarters of the motion-picture world, from many of the biggest producers in the profession, came testimonials of William Desmond Taylor's worth as a friend. One was Jesse L. Lasky, first vice-president of the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, and with whom Mr. Taylor was closely associated. "I have lost a friend," said Mr. Lasky, "a man who won that place not only for his own personal qualities, but also for the manner in which he discharged his professional duties ("Friends Express Sorrow").

This article was accompanied by a photo of Mabel Normand with a caption above the photo that read "Linked In Sinister Drama of Mystery". Below the photo was a caption stating that Normand had been questioned in connection with the case.

This article from the *New York Times* on February 3 already focused on the “female” aspect of the case, but just a few paragraphs later, the same article said the police had a theory that a man hid in Taylor’s apartment while he walked Mabel Normand to her car, and then ambushed Taylor when he returned to his apartment.

Women acquaintances of the director will be questioned. The theory the police are working on is that a jealous woman either shot Taylor or had him shot. That a woman actually did the slaying is the more generally accepted theory (“Movie Director Found Murdered”).

By February 4, reporters had begun to uncover information from Taylor’s past, and the discourse on Taylor’s murder became less sorrowful and more suspicious. Taylor’s ex-sister-in-law, Ada Deane-Tanner, who had been abandoned along with her two children by Taylor’s younger brother, Denis, revealed some facts about Taylor that were previously unknown to the public in this article from the *Los Angeles Times*.

Foremost among the developments were statements that Mr. Taylor’s name really was William Deane-Tanner...Mrs. Ada Deane-Tanner, who says she is the deserted wife of Mr. Taylor’s brother... asserted he was married, but was divorced or obtained a divorce and his former wife now lives in New York...most of his personal friends previously have stated they believed he was a bachelor and doubted the idea that he had a daughter, Ethel Daisy, living in New York (“Secrets of Taylor Found”).

It is interesting to note that Taylor’s former sister-in-law mentions that he was divorced and not that he had abandoned his wife and child in New York. Possibly she was trying to avoid mentioning this fact, but by February 5 reporters learned the truth that

he had deserted his wife and daughter in 1908. Even though Taylor had recently reconnected with his daughter, it did nothing to redeem him in the public's eye. It is possible that Taylor's murder would not have been a scandal at all if he had not abandoned his family. But for the press, the revelation that Taylor had one shameful secret meant that he must have more, and it fueled them to keep digging into Taylor's past to see what else they might find. Even something as innocent as changing his name, which many stars did, became highly suspect after the abandonment of his family was revealed.

From the *Los Angeles Times*, February 5, 1922

For many years—from 1908 until slightly more than two years ago—Ethel Daisy Tanner, the daughter knew nothing of her father except that he had disappeared. Then the mother learned that her divorced husband was the film director under the name of Taylor. Last July, according to the girl's friends, he paid her a visit on his return from Europe. He asked her to call him "father." Gradually to the girl were unfolded some of the reasons lying behind the disappearance, although the real motive has never been divulged, as far as known ("Discovered By Daughter").

Taylor's ex-wife confirmed that she had been married to William Cunningham Deane-Tanner, an antiques dealer in New York City, and that he had disappeared, and become the Hollywood director known as William Desmond Taylor. In the article, below the discourse on Taylor as a "womanizer" began when reporters allegedly found a 'source' from New York that stated that Taylor and his brother, Denis, liked to chase women. Taylor is also accused in this article of having a drinking problem. It should be

noted that the person who provided this information was unnamed in this article. Neither does the source reveal what exactly the nature of his/her relationship to Taylor was. By this date, the discourse on Taylor was beginning to enter the realm of unverified hearsay and speculation. This discourse is most likely what began to turn Taylor's murder into a sex scandal. With the 'evidence' in this article that Taylor "ran around a good deal with women," reporters would begin trying to relate every person and everything found in his apartment to this sexual angle. Despite the fact that Taylor had several close male friends that visited him regularly at apartment, they are never mentioned in the articles. Only his relationships with women are highlighted after this point.

From Los Angeles Times, February 5, 1922

The picture of Taylor as a man austere and scholarly, who paid little attention to women as drawn by some of his moving-picture associates was also shattered for there were a few persons found in the city today who said that their affairs with women had been such that no one who knew them could help noticing them. They went to "extremes" as one person put it. He [Taylor] began to drink quite heavily shortly before his disappearance and it was thought by those who knew him that he was unhappy. He began to be known as one who ran around a good deal with women ("Ex-Wife Reveals Bizarre Life").

Even though both Mabel Normand and Mary Miles Minter had both been eliminated as suspects in Taylor's murder because of their alibis, both continued to be mentioned in the discourse on Taylor's murder which must have furthered the notion in the public's mind that Taylor continued to have many dalliances with women as he had

been speculated to have done in the past in New York. The article below contains the first mention of a drug angle in the police investigation. Although there is no primary source material to substantiate it, there was a rumor in Hollywood that Mabel Normand had been a drug addict at some point during her career in Hollywood and that Taylor might have paid for her to go to a sanitarium to cure her addiction. Police must have thought the rumors were serious enough to investigate whether drugs had any connection with Taylor's murder. What is certain is that the drugs angle in this case must have even further clouded the public's suspicions about Taylor.

From the *Los Angeles Times*, February 5, 1922

Details of Mr. Taylor's past absorbed particular attention yesterday when it was learned he had led a dual life disappearing in New York....Meanwhile, other officers..particularly narcotic traffic experts, turned their attention to another new angle. They started yesterday afternoon to investigate several reports concerning "dope" traffic in Hollywood and other supposed clues,¹² which tend to indicate that visits of "peddlers" of dope had been made in that vicinity ("Mabel Normand Letters").

On February 6 came the first mention of the pink nightgown that police had allegedly found in Taylor's apartment. The introduction of the nightgown into this discourse on Taylor is significant because it furthers the sexual aspect brought forth in the earlier article. Taken on their own, the letters and autographed photos from Minter and Normand probably would not have meant much, but the discovery of the nightgown

¹² The word 'clues' was spelled as 'clews' in this time period.

along with all these things provided what must have seemed like obvious proof that Taylor was a sexual deviant. Although it is not stated outright, the public could easily have read what the discovery of a woman's nightgown in Taylor's home implied. For the public, it meant that Taylor who was unmarried, was probably having sex with the women who had written him the letters and autographed the photos found in his apartment. Nearly every single day since Taylor's body was found, the news had some new revelation about Taylor's alleged secret double life. It is also possible that all of the previous discourse that had painted Taylor as charming and handsome was working against him now. In this new light, it must have seemed that Taylor had been using his looks to lure young women into a sexual liaison.

From the *Los Angeles Times*, February 6, 1922

A woman's pink silk nightgown found in the bachelor apartments of William Desmond Taylor..From the former employees of Mr. Taylor it was learned that silken things unknown in a man's wardrobe were among the effects of Mr. Taylor. Henry Peavey, the houseman who discovered the body last Thursday morning, declared he had seen at least one pink silk nightgown there. Police officers yesterday were evasive as to the whereabouts of the lingerie ("Womans Night Robe In House").

Even though police seemed to be looking for a man in Taylor's murder, the articles kept coming back to theories involving a woman. This one from the *New York Times* on February 9 revealed one theory that police had about how Taylor was shot. Because the bullet hole in Taylor's coat was below the bullet hole in his vest, the theory was that Taylor possibly had his arms raised when he was shot.

A new theory of the murder was advanced today and received some consideration at the Sheriff's office. It is that Taylor was shot by a woman whom he was embracing and who had her arms around him. The theory is based on the position of the bullet found in his back and fact that Taylor is thought to have his arms raised when was killed. Rage, because she had been scorned by the Director, is the motive imputed to the woman ("Police Say Facts in Taylor Murder Are Not Revealed").

The article below mentions Mabel Normand's missing letters and serves as evidence that police were deliberately misleading the public about both the whereabouts of and importance of Normand's letters to their investigation. As stated in the police report, they already knew that most of Taylor's written correspondence, including Normand's letters were with Charles Eyton because they had given him permission to take them. It is unclear why they continued to cast suspicion on someone they knew to be innocent, but the effect was that it kept Normand under a cloud of suspicion in the public view. In the article, Eyton lied, as he did in a previous article, about having taken any letters. At the end he mentions that he feels there would be nothing of importance in the letters. Unbeknownst to the public, Eyton knew this because he had already read them.

From the *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 1922:

Late in the day it was declared by the officers that missing letters have an important bearing, in their belief, on the case. Among these letters were several written by Mabel Normand... Everyone questioned by Capt. Adams concerning the letters has denied having them or removing them

from the Taylor apartment. The comment made by Mr. Eyton regarding the missing letters was as follows: “I have taken no letters from Mr. Taylor’s home the day the body was found, nor have I taken any, or had any letters given me by anyone since. I hardly think, however, that there was anything in the missing letters that would be of any assistance in the search for the slayer (“Chauffeur Gives Fresh Lead”).

Normand was questioned several times in the case by both the police and the District Attorney’s office in the weeks following Taylor’s death. She was forced to make several statements as to the nature of her relationship with Taylor. The one below reveals her exasperation as she pleads with the reporter to tell the public that she was not in love with Taylor and did not have anything to do with his death. Mary Miles Minter was questioned by the police and the DA as well, but her lawyer spoke on her behalf and said only that Minter was cooperating fully with authorities in the investigation.

From the *Los Angeles Times*, February 11, 1922:

No one will ever know how I regret the terrible tragedy. I have told truthfully everything I know...The handkerchief and gown found in Mr. Taylor’s apartment have been identified as other than mine. It has been established that I was not in love with Mr. Taylor; that he escorted me to my car that evening and chatted until I drove away, when we waved goodbye to each other. Please tell the public that I knew absolutely nothing about this terrible happening (“Death Enigma, Asserts Star”).

All of the articles above are from either the *Los Angeles Times* or *The New York Times*, and although their reporting did verge on speculation at times, it was nothing

compared to what was reported in the tabloid style press of the time. Edward Doherty, Los Angeles correspondent for the *New York News* was particularly critical of Taylor and of Hollywood during this time. He reveled in reporting on all of the more outrageous theories of Taylor's murder that the other papers would not print and used Taylor's murder as an opportunity to skewer the Hollywood film community by reporting on the allegedly wild parties they threw. Doherty's article is the only one that makes a reference to Taylor's possible homosexuality. This aspect of the story was never picked up by the other more conservative newspapers, they overwhelmingly focused on Taylor as a womanizer. Taylor's police file contains an interview with a reporter from Los Angeles who said he had heard rumors that Taylor was gay. It is possible that when Doherty reported this item, he also had heard the same rumors.

The "love cult" angle was introduced into the case late in the day through the troubled conscience of a resident of Chinatown. He had supplied the opium for the members of this cult, all men, of which, he says, Taylor was a member. He declares the men would lie in silk kimonos, smoke the essence of the poppy flower and so commence their ritual, old as Sodom.

The Chinese asserted that the members of the cult were held together by a bond, unthinkable, unnameable, unbelievable... (Doherty).

Other articles gave Taylor nicknames like this one from the *New York Telegram*, February 12, 1922 which called Taylor "the love pirate."

Fate is Seen in Tragic End of Filmdom's "Love Pirate." It's a man's game--that of love pirate. The man plays, and plays--and PAYS. A potent, pulsing personality; a magnetism dangerous as it is compelling... A list of

the girls, the women, taken aboard the love pirate's ship of dreams for a brief cruise on the sea of pleasure would read like a slightly deleted directory of the screen's feminine stars...Of only one fact we are sure--that William Deane-Tanner, alias William Desmond Taylor, could no longer escape the moving finger of Fate. The hour was at hand when he must pay (Dixon).

This type of discourse was, in essence, trying draw a cause-and-effect link between Taylor's alleged immoral lifestyle and his murder. "You play, you pay." As the weeks passed, and suspect after suspect was investigated and ruled out by police, the press started to draw their own conclusions as to what might have happened. The conclusion they drew was that if Taylor had truly led a double-life, had sexual affairs with all sorts of women, did drugs, drank, and attended orgies, then he must certainly have deserved to be murdered. Not all of the news outlets approved of the sensationalistic manner in which Taylor and his friends were being discussed, however. This article from the *Los Angeles Times* on February 14, criticized the public scrutiny of the private letters found in Taylor's home.

In the opinion of The Times the public has no right to any papers or letters in this or any other case that does not have a direct and official connection with the untanglement of this mystery. The Times has always refused to suppress news, but it does contend that to drag the bottom of the sea for every shred and putrid remnant of gossip and scandal affecting every person who had a speaking acquaintance with a murdered man is unjust,

outrageous, unsafe, unethical, ungenerous—and mighty bad business
 (“Persecuting the Movies”).

In the end, we can point to several forces at work in the shaping of the discourse on Taylor after his death. Firstly, because of the nature of Silent era star discourse, Taylor had been created as a person, in the public view at least, without flaws. Today, stars openly discuss past divorces, drug addiction, depression, etc. But the discourse of the 1910’s and 1920’s did not yet allow for stars to suffer from the problems of everyday people. There was no way for Taylor to deal with his past mistakes within this discourse so he changed his name and hid his past from the public. For his fans to react as they did, they must have felt extremely betrayed by the knowledge of his secret double life.

Secondly, Taylor’s death happened right at the beginning of an era of sensationalistic journalism and immense societal change with regard to moral and sexual values in America. It is not entirely surprising that Taylor’s murder engaged America in a conversation about sexual behavior. The love notes, photographs, and women’s nightgown all implied to the public that a forty-nine year old unmarried man who had painted himself as the model citizen was really engaged in the sexual exploitation of young unmarried actresses. Coming as it did just six months after the Fatty Arbuckle scandal, another case involving the sexual exploitation and death of a young unmarried actress, the public was, understandably, outraged. Finally, the case was never solved and Taylor’s reputation could never be vindicated despite a concerted effort on the part of the people that knew him well. One of Taylor’s defenders was the screenwriter, Julia Crawford Ivers, with whom he collaborated on most of his films at Paramount. Ivers was a very private person, giving very few interviews during her career. The fact that she was

doing one now indicates how highly she regarded Taylor and how much it bothered her to see so many lies written about him. This statement from Ivers was printed in the *Los Angeles Examiner* on February 7, 1922-- the day of Taylor's funeral.

This man was shot in the back by a cowardly assassin. He was given no opportunity to defend himself, for he did not know the meaning of the word fear. And more cowardly than the assassin's bullet is the tongue of scandal which is striking at his reputation. His friends know that, when it is all over, the character of Mr. Taylor will stand, as it always has stood, for everything that is fine and worthwhile ("Julia Crawford Ivers").

Despite the numerous examples of written discourse that can be found in newspapers and magazines that featured Taylor's colleagues trying to defend his character from the defamation that was occurring in the press, none of them could do anything to reverse the damage that had already been done.

William Desmond Taylor's murder was never solved. Police investigated hundreds of leads over the years, but none of them lead to a killer. Edward Sands, Taylor's former secretary and valet, was never found. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that the owner of a hotel in San Diego contacted police a few years after Taylor's murder to report that a man exactly matching Sands' description had committed suicide there, but Los Angeles police never investigated the tip. If this man was Sands, then the person who was the LAPD's prime suspect for years in the Taylor case had actually died long before he stopped being a suspect. The three books published on Taylor's murder each concluded with a different theory. Sidney Kirkpatrick's book, *A Cast of Killers*, which was based on King Vidor's investigation, concluded that Charlotte Shelby murdered

Taylor because she thought her daughter, Mary Miles Minter, was having a relationship with him. Robert Giroux's *A Deed of Death* concluded that Mabel Normand's drug dealers had killed Taylor, and Charles Higham's *Murder In Hollywood* concluded that Mary Miles Minter killed Taylor because he rejected her romantically.

The writing on William Desmond Taylor's murder went on for decades after his death. Two of the most illuminating examples come from two retired detectives who worked on the investigation and were clearly still disturbed that the case had never been solved despite the fact that the two succeeding District Attorneys after Thomas Lee Woolwine, the D.A. in 1922, both re-investigated the murder. Both detectives wrote that it had always been plaintively clear, to them at least, that Mary Miles Minter's mother, Charlotte Shelby, had committed the murder, but because of her close personal ties to Woolwine, there was no way that she would have been charged. In 1930, eight years after the Taylor murder, Edward King, a retired investigator for Woolwine, published an article entitled *I Know Who Killed Desmond Taylor* in a magazine called *True Detective Mysteries* (Long 271). King wrote that the day after Taylor's murder, Woolwine assigned himself and another detective named Jesse Winn to perform their own investigation of the crime independently of the police (Long 276). In the article, King revealed that Taylor's close friend, Arthur Hoyt, told them that Taylor had been distraught because the actress Mary Miles Minter was in love with him and would make repeated visits to him at all hours of the morning threatening to scream and make a scene if he forced her to leave his apartment. Upon learning this, the detectives collected Taylor's suit from the mortuary and discovered three long blonde hairs on the lapel of Taylor's coat. They were able to match the hairs to those collected from a brush of

Minter's found in her dressing room at Paramount. Minter was questioned but she provided no details and had an alibi. They tried to question Charlotte Shelby as well, but she was uncooperative and demanded that police deal with her lawyer instead (Long 288). King stated that all of the evidence collected was later removed to Woolwine's house and never seen again. Although he does not state it outright in the article, probably because Minter and Shelby were still alive, it is obvious that he thought Shelby shot Taylor to end Minter's obsession with him and that Woolwine knew all along that Shelby had done it which is why he disposed of all the evidence.

In 1941 retired LAPD detective, Leroy Sanderson, who had also worked on the Taylor case wrote a letter calling for a re-examination of the case based upon the following evidence that was never investigated: from July 1921 to February 1, 1922 there is evidence of Mary Miles Minter being deeply in love with Mr. Taylor and being a frequent visitor to his apartment; on one occasion Charlotte Shelby's secretary and her chauffeur witnessed Shelby putting a loaded revolver in the sleeve of her coat and accompanied her to Taylor's apartment where she demanded to make a search of it to determine if Minter was there or not; Minter was not there but both her secretary and chauffeur stated that she said she intended to kill Taylor if Minter was there (Long 317); on the morning of February 2, 1922, Shelby called her chauffeur at 7:30am to come and pick her up because Taylor had been murdered;¹³ a man named Frank Brown had given Shelby a Blue Steel Break-top .38 Caliber revolver which is the weapon believed to have been used in Taylor's murder; in a detailed written statement taken from Margaret Fillmore (Minter's sister) in 1937, she said that she had lied about her mother's

¹³ Taylor's body was just being discovered by his valet at 7:30am and no one knew that he was murdered until later that morning. Shelby could not have known this information unless she was involved.

whereabouts on the day of Taylor's murder to cover up for her, she also said that Shelby had locked Minter in her room all day on February 1, 1922 because she feared Minter was going to run away with Taylor and that Minter had left the house sometime in the early evening and returned around 8:30pm; Margaret said that Minter had always suspected that Shelby had killed Taylor (Long 324). The writer of this letter, Leroy Sanderson, suspected that Shelby hired Carl Stockdale, an actor friend who had appeared in Minter's movies, to kill Taylor because Shelby lived off of Minter's income and feared losing the money if Minter ran away with Taylor (Long 33).

This discourse on Taylor is extremely significant for two different reasons. It contains shocking allegations of misconduct on the part of the Los Angeles District Attorney, and it proves that Taylor was not in a sexual relationship with Mary Miles Minter. That instead, Minter was pursuing him. The sexual allegation was one of the major aspects of Taylor's scandal, and if these writings had been able to exonerate Taylor in that way, he might have been seen in a different light. Unfortunately, King's article was only published in a small-time magazine read by armchair detectives, and Sanderson's article was never published.

In the end, none of the discourse written by either friends or law enforcement officials to defend Taylor and recover his reputation had any effect. This study shows how the powerful negative discourse on William Desmond Taylor has buried his legacy and complicated his recovery for film history.

Conclusion

A Google search for the name William Desmond Taylor today reveals that amateur historians worldwide are still dedicating websites to the Hollywood folklore aspect of Taylor's murder, but more recently, the announcement of the development of a major Hollywood studio project on Taylor could signal a renewed interest in the real facts of his life. Kimberly Peirce was slated to direct a movie on Taylor that she also co-wrote entitled *Silent Star* for Universal Pictures. The project has been delayed over budget concerns, but the fact that it is even being considered is a positive sign that the world is ready to take another look at a marginalized figure. Although, there is no way to tell at this point what the focus of Peirce's script will be, her past work to expose the truth behind the murder of a transgendered teen named Brandon Teena in the film *Boys Don't Cry* is a sign that Peirce is both interested in revealing an injustice done to Taylor and the hidden homosexual aspects of his life. The fact that Peirce spent several years doing archival research on Taylor is a good indication that she is interested in telling Taylor's story from a well-informed point of view.

The discussion of Taylor's homosexuality is the most important difference between the 1920's and the contemporary discourse on Taylor and reveals another layer of his persona. It also explains Taylor's secretiveness about his private life and reveals the motivation behind Paramount general manager, Charles Eyton, in removing the letters from his home after his death. George Hopkins' memoir about his relationship with Taylor, claims that Taylor had letters that would have pointed to his sexual relationships with men. It is hard to imagine how Taylor's scandal would have been reported in the

1920's if the press revealed the contents of these letters. It would have been the first Hollywood gay sex scandal.

The homosexual context is significant in examining both Taylor's personal history and the written discourse on him. As stated earlier, a star's persona is constructed to both reveal and conceal information about the star. If we consider that Taylor was rejected by his family and sent to the ranch in Kansas because he was considered too effeminate, then the hypermasculine aspect which was used to 'reveal' him to an audience in his written discourse was really used to conceal possible effeminacy or homosexuality. A photo from the Bison Archives published in Charles Higham's book *Murder In Hollywood* of Taylor wearing what appears to be a long woman's nightgown begs the question of why it was never considered that the pink nightgown purportedly found in Taylor's apartment might have actually belonged to Taylor himself. Newspaper and magazine articles always suggested that the nightgown belonged to a woman with whom Taylor might have been having a sexual relationship. Presumably this is because the written discourse on Taylor, which in part, created his star persona was designed to make the possibility of homosexuality impossible. The poem of Taylor's that was published conceals and reveals homosexuality as well. It conceals in that it makes a reference to a relationship with a woman, but it reveals in that Taylor hints at being misunderstood and rejected for something about his true nature.

While it was only hinted at in articles from the 1920's suggesting that Taylor was a member of a homosexual opium cult, the discussion of Taylor's homosexuality was made possible first by Sidney D. Kirkpatrick's book *A Cast of Killers*. In it, Kirkpatrick used director King Vidor's research notes and interviews for a movie on Taylor. Vidor's

interviews with Taylor's contemporaries suggest that many of them knew that Taylor was gay and had a long-term relationship with George Hopkins who served as the production designer on several of Taylor's later films. Later, writer Charles Higham used Hopkins' unpublished memoir as a primary source for his book *Murder In Hollywood*.

In his book *His Picture in the Papers* Richard Schickel discusses the unfortunate end that many stars of Silent era faced.

Certain actors achieved unprecedented heights of popularity and prosperity almost overnight in the period 1915-1920 and this phenomenon, this beginning of a new celebrity system, destroyed or crippled almost everyone caught up in it (27).

This phenomenon that Schickel refers to did affect almost everyone. Even Charlie Chaplin, undoubtedly the most celebrated figure from the Silent era today, eventually had to quit working and relocate to Europe where he spent the rest of his life. But why did they disappear as quickly as they had appeared? The discourse on stars available in the period magazines, newspapers, and trade papers is a rich and important resource available to scholars to help answer questions about the Silent era like this one. This study reveals how stars and their lives embodied and continue to embody the ever-changing moral and sexual values of our society. The study of Silent era discourse has revealed that the way that stars were written about and constructed in that time period unfortunately contributed, in part, to their demise. In William Desmond Taylor's time "the construction of the star was coherent and non-contradictory. The image of the star seemed simply to reflect the private life of the star" (deCordova 138). This was problematic because when stars' real-life problems began to be reported in the press, the

new discourse did not reconcile with the star persona. After Fatty Arbuckle's and William Desmond Taylor's scandals, both men were re-read by audiences as sexually and morally transgressive. The discourse of the era had no way to contain or re-frame the public perception of these men and the scandal extended making the Hollywood enclave as a whole highly suspect to the public.

In time, star discourse and the creation of stars adapted itself to encompass the problems of stars. Judy Garland is a good example of a star who survived scandal by openly discussing her troubled history with drug and alcohol addiction. She changed her persona from one of the "good girl" who made movies like *The Wizard of Oz* to one of the "survivor" who brought all of her angst to a series of live concerts that brought her a whole new fan base of gay men.

Future study of William Desmond Taylor and star discourse can add depth to many areas of film studies. The fact that Taylor functioned as a 'star' in Hollywood even though he was a director suggests a new area of study where star discourse can be applied to star directors. Also, the theoretical study of star discourse can reveal our society's changing perceptions on masculinity, femininity, class structure, sexuality, morality, and politics among other things. Our paper archives and historical periodicals are an often under-utilized resource that reveals much about almost every aspect of the film industry. The question of how the media affects our lives is a major discussion in our society today and stars and celebrity culture are a large part of that discussion. The question of both how much stars influence us, and how much they should influence us is a constant national debate, but their unquestionable influence over how we view our own society and our own lives points to the importance of the study of star culture history today. But

a reclamation of Taylor is also important to queer film studies history. King Vidor's interviews with Taylor's contemporaries suggest that the Hollywood community knew about and tolerated Taylor's relationship with George Hopkins. If this is true, then it suggests a previously unknown era in Hollywood where gays were not 'out' in public but were privately accepted within the industry which would be an entirely new area of study.

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