

## The New York Gossip Magazine in *The Great Gatsby*

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F. Scott Fitzgerald's New York included Colonel William D'Alton Mann: hero of Gettysburg, swindler, and publisher of the New York gossip magazine *Town Topics*. On 17 May 1920, just over a month after the Fitzgeralds' marriage in the rectory of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Colonel Mann died at 80. His death was covered in New York's newspapers, and discussed on New York streets. The media coverage of Mann's death showed New Yorkers had not forgotten, or forgiven, his notorious reputation as the city's most successful blackmailer. As the *New York Times* obituary showed, New York still remembered Mann's libel trial of 1905–06. The O. J. Simpson trial of its day, the *Times* recalled that it "provided highly entertaining reading for many days, the testimony being highly spiced throughout." That trial had revealed that several prominent New Yorkers had been "almost compelled" by the Colonel to subscribe to a forthcoming book called *Fads and Fancies* for "sums of five figures" in return for the Colonel's promise that certain news items would not appear in *Town Topics*. "Yet," the *Times* wryly noted, "Colonel Mann, when interviewed by a NEW YORK TIMES reporter, was violent in his denunciation of blackmailers" ("Colonel Mann Dies").

Within this historical context, Fitzgerald's two allusions to the gossip magazine "*Town Tattle*" in *The Great Gatsby* take on greater significance. These small allusions to the magazine Myrtle buys on her way into Manhattan (*Gatsby* 27) and keeps copies of in her apartment (29) have never been analyzed, but, like so much else in the novel, these brief references carry considerable symbolic weight. The New Yorkers who made up Fitzgerald's original audience would have recognized these references for what they were: a New York in-joke and an incisive criticism of the period's loss of moral direction with the rise of the gossip industry and the beginnings of America's celebrity culture. These passing allusions also give us an insight into Fitzgerald's personal history as a writer, since they show that he noticed the conversations around him that first spring he and Zelda spent in New York, and understood their importance. In his satire of *Town Topics* as "*Town Tattle*," Fitzgerald provided his early readers with a timely and relevant critique because when *The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925, Colonel Mann, his magazine, and his blackmail were still fresh on the lips of New Yorkers.

### ***Town Topics: All the News, Fit or Not***

It is difficult for modern readers to appreciate the impact Fitzgerald's two allusions to *Town Topics* would have had on his first New York readers without knowing more about the magazine to which they refer, the history of which was common knowledge at the time. The real "*Town Tattle*" was founded in 1885, when Eugene Mann (the Colonel's brother) became the owner of a bankrupt journal of high society called *Andrews' American Queen: A National Society Journal*. Eugene replaced the engagement, wedding, and birth announcements of *Andrews' American Queen* (now renamed *Town Topics*) with columns implying the impure relationships between society heiresses and their young doctors or the wild nature of parties attended by *débutantes*. Gossip columns, as we now know them, may in fact have been Eugene's invention. The magazine's gossip was racy enough to attract the attention of the newly formed New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, and in 1887 Eugene Mann was convicted of sending obscene matter through the mail. He pleaded ill health and received a suspended sentence. Four years later, faced with the same charge, he transferred ownership of the magazine to his brother. Under the Colonel, the magazine's gossip columns ventured even beyond the subject matter permitted by Eugene.<sup>1</sup>

Under Mann, the opening section of the magazine, which Eugene had given the suggestive title "Saunterings," covered a huge swath of society gossip. The magazine's revealing contents were suggested by its cover—a drawing of two women with bare shoulders leaning together and whispering. They were surrounded by advertisements for flowers, fashionable gowns, and for Bromo-Seltzer—this last announced as a cure for "club, banquet and holiday headaches" (see fig. 1 for a sample cover from Fitzgerald's time in New York). These images clearly promised a view of New York high life with a dash of scandal. The Colonel's *Town Topics* dealt frankly with such issues as suicide ("Mrs. Morse has had more than her share of ill luck, though the suicide of her worthless brother in Paris probably did not distress her as much as was imagined") and extra-marital affairs ("If I were the charming matron impeded by a husband and child, I would be a little more circumspect in my meetings with a certain 'Royal' gentleman" [The Saunterer, 24 Sept. 1908: 1, 7]). There were even allusions to homosexuality ("Ed and Gus not only have a business partnership but have still another bond in common" [The Saunterer, 24 Sept. 1908: 9]) and cross dressing ("The truant broker [was] finally discovered—clad in pale pink silk pajamas like a veritable cherub—sleeping peacefully in his suite" [The Saunterer, 26 Nov. 1908: 1]). Unlike the *New York Times*,

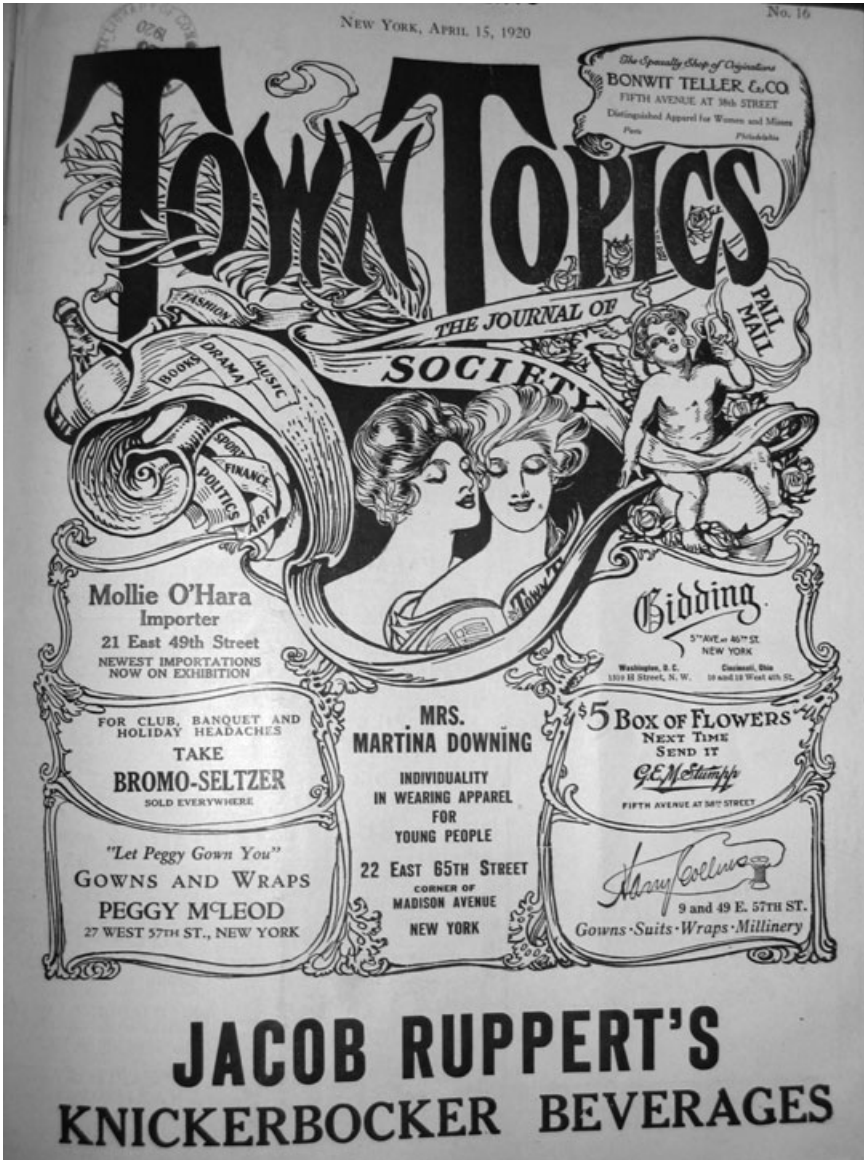


Fig. 1. Town Topics. New York. 15 April 1920. Front cover.

with its conservative slogan "All the News That's Fit to Print," *Town Topics* published the city's dirty laundry: all the news, fit or not.

On 12 July 1905, New Yorkers discovered what they must have long suspected: that *Town Topics* was a vehicle for blackmail. That morning the *New York Times* carried a front-page story concerning a sting operation conducted

by Detective Flood of the District Attorney's Office. The sting sounded like something out of a novel: Edwin Post, husband of Emily (later the famous etiquette columnist), had received a phone call from a *Town Topics* editor, Charles Ahle, informing him that the magazine was about to publish a story about him and "a white studio in Stamford and a fair charmer." For \$500, Post learned, *Town Topics* would "keep that stuff out." In an act of incredible bravery, at a time when news of an affair could destroy one's personal and professional reputation, Post agreed to the terms and then called the District Attorney's Office. The day before the story broke, Post met with Ahle in a men's washroom at the New York Stock Exchange. Overheard by Detective Flood, Ahle let Post know that he was getting off easy, noting that the magazine had "scandals that have paid as much as \$10,000" ("Got \$500 from Post" 5). Post gave Ahle an envelope with five marked one-hundred-dollar bills, upon the receipt of which Ahle was arrested.

Detective Flood confiscated both the money and a briefcase containing a list of other "subscriptions" Ahle had collected for *Fads and Fancies of Representative Americans*, a book that did not exist. The list included J. J. Astor, A. Van Rensselaer, and three Vanderbilts ("Got \$500 From Post" 1). Colonel Mann was in Europe when the story broke, but he soon returned to see if he could prevent further damage. When he disembarked from his boat on 24 July, the New York press was there to meet him. Their primary question concerned a name they had not expected to find on Ahle's list of "subscribers"—that of the President of the United States. The *Times* announced Mann's answer on the front page: "Oh, Roosevelt Forgot, Col. Mann Declares."

In 1904, Theodore Roosevelt's daughter Alice had made her first visit to Newport. New York's more respectable media outlets reported on her clothing, her dance partners, and her hairstyle. *Town Topics*, predictably, differed. The Colonel's magazine suggested that during her stay, the President's daughter had taken "stimulants" and, while going about unchaperoned, had engaged in "certain doings that gentle people are not supposed to discuss" (qtd. in Logan, *The Man* 48). The press wondered if the President himself had fallen prey to the same arrangement that pertained to the other "subscribers" to *Fads and Fancies*. Mann informed them that the President had agreed to be featured in *Fads and Fancies*, but that as the President was "such a busy man," he must have forgotten about the arrangement. He added that the President's chapter in the book had, naturally, been arranged "without cost" to the President ("Oh, Roosevelt" 1).

The *Times* also wanted to know why there were different subscription prices for the book, noting that some had paid \$2,500 while others had paid up to \$10,000. Mann promised he would look into the matter and declared

that if he found any man at *Town Topics* guilty of blackmail, he would do his best to put him in jail. Shortly after this announcement, Ahle paid his bail and escaped to Europe. Meanwhile, over the next few months, the Colonel concentrated on producing a copy of *Fads and Fancies*. If the book existed, then it might be argued that the subscriptions had been real. To much fanfare, it was published in December. The *New York Times* magazine section on 10 December 1905 provided full-page pictures of the book's cover and declared: "Fads and Fancies: A Rich Man's Book. 105 Immortals Have Subscribed \$200,000 to be in It and Get it—What They Received for Their Thousands."

Since the Colonel had to make the book appear as if it had been worth at least a fraction of what the subscribers had paid, it was lavishly produced. The *Times* reported that each copy was "preserved in a solid oak case" and bound in morocco leather with gilt edging on the borders; the back was lined with "rich green watered silk" and the pages were hand-made Japanese vellum ("Fads and Fancies" 1, 2). The Colonel's employees boasted that each volume required the hide of an entire cow (Rowe 271). The *Times* estimated that even if the volumes had cost \$25,000 to produce, the publishers (who had collected an estimated \$200,000 in subscriptions) had still made a considerable profit. There was no reason for the paper to give the reason for the sudden production of this lavish collection since, as the *Times* reported, this book had already been "more talked about than any other work brought out in New York in many years" ("Fads and Fancies" 1).

Following Mann's attacks on the President's daughter in 1904, a series of counter-attacks on the Colonel's activities began to appear in *Collier's* magazine. In a number of pointed editorials, *Collier's* referred to *Town Topics* as a "sewer-like sheet" that occupied itself with "printing scandal about people who are not cowardly enough to pay for silence" (qtd. in Logan, *The Man* 51, 53). *Collier's* was a general family magazine published by Robert Collier, a twenty-nine-year-old Irishman whose father, an immigrant and self-made millionaire, was often ridiculed in *Town Topics*. The idea, hatched by Collier and his editor Norman Hapgood, was that if they persisted in their attacks they might lure the Colonel into suing them for criminal libel and, thus, into explaining his actions in court (Logan, *The Man* 49–54; Reed 109). They succeeded—on 15 January 1906 Norman Hapgood appeared in the criminal branch of the New York Supreme Court to face charges of criminal libel brought against him by the Colonel's business partner, Judge Deuel (Logan, *The Man* 150). The trial led to a media blitz. New York's newspapers were full of news of the trial, often devoting the whole of their front sections to its daily developments (Logan, *The Man* 152). It was just as popular with members of the general public. In her biography of Mann, Andy Logan reports that in addition to the throngs

of people who began to assemble outside the Criminal Courts Building on Center Street every morning just before proceedings began with the hope of getting a seat that often “court attendants would be called to the telephone during the proceedings to ask if they could make room for an additional party of ten or twelve” (*The Man* 151). Newspaper editorialists rejoiced at the ease of caricaturing the Colonel, who had a huge head of white hair and enormous handlebar mustaches, and showed him, variously, as a toad guarding a giant sewer labeled “Town Topics” and as a well-dressed beggar accepting contributions from the rich in his outstretched top hat (see fig. 2).<sup>2</sup>

During the course of this trial, Mann admitted he had amassed subscriptions for *Fads and Fancies* and also collected certain “borrowings.” The transcript made it clear how most of these business transactions had been conducted:

Q. Did you ever borrow any money from W. C. Whitney, Colonel? A. Yes.

Q. How much? A. Ten thousand dollars.

Q. Ever paid it back? A. Probably not.

Q. When did you borrow it? A. Years ago.

Q. Did you ever give him any security? A. No. (qtd. in Rowe 280)

Names and amounts were repeated until the lawyer for the defense reached William K. Vanderbilt. He asked the Colonel if he had ever received any money from him. “Yes,” said the Colonel, “I can’t remember how much” (qtd. in Rowe 280). The judge dismissed the libel charge against Hapgood; instead of being vindicated, the Colonel found himself charged with perjury and faced a second trial.

The Colonel was ultimately acquitted of having committed perjury, but after the conclusion of the libel trial in early 1906, he continued to be condemned, now openly, in the New York press, since once it was clear that Hapgood would be acquitted of criminal libel for his statements about the Colonel, the rest of the news media realized that they were equally safe to comment on the blackmail conducted by Mann through his magazine. In February 1906, *The American Lawyer* commented that Hapgood’s actions in condemning the Colonel’s magazine had cleared “the moral atmosphere” and let in “light upon the motives and methods of social vampires.” They noted, too, that because *Town Topics* had published up to 600 items a year against men and women “describing the commission of mean, vile and corrupt acts and practices” without giving those same men and women the opportunity (which a trial would have allowed them) of defending their own actions, that *Town Topics* had acted, in effect, as a sort of “Police Gazette of the 400” (“Psychological Paradoxes”). That same month in an editorial titled “Parasites of



**Fig. 2.** Cory, Campbell. “The Helping Hands.” Editorial cartoon. *The World, Evening Edition*. “Evening World’s Home Magazine.” New York. 23 Jan. 1906: [10].

Society,” *The Independent* called the editors of *Town Topics* “rodents, scouring about every gutter of fat social filth” (“Editorials”). In March 1906, *Health* magazine perhaps summed up the common feeling most succinctly through its simple headline, “Mann’s Inhumanity to Man.”

New Yorkers were not quick to forget. In 1916, a play called “The Fear Market” opened in New York. Its author was Amélie Rives, whose ex-husband

had once sued Mann for libel, and its plot concerned the unsavory activities of a “rambunctious retired military figure” and his scandal magazine (Logan, “That Was New York: II” 41). The Colonel remained undeterred by such publicity, and during the years following his libel and perjury trials he concentrated on amassing a personal wealth in the millions. He was 79 and still publishing *Town Topics* when F. Scott Fitzgerald first moved to New York in 1919.

In April 1920, when Scott and Zelda were both living in New York, *Town Topics* reported on the Aviator’s Ball at the Ritz-Carleton Hotel. It was the sort of party the Fitzgeralds might have attended. The story read: “Not since the Carnival de Victoire has the Ritz housed such a mass of every kind and station of New York society and toward dawn, when the smarter element decided that the party was becoming a bit mixed, numerous theatrical celebrities burst in and, well, the real show was on.” A French actress joined the party and, the article continued, “Never before in my experience has any woman dared to make such a display of nudity at a social or semi-social entertainment. Even the stars of the ‘golden horseshoe,’ who will admit themselves that they are pretty well seasoned, were flabbergasted when the woman popped into the middle of the ballroom in nothing but some beads above her waist” (The Saunterer, 22 Apr. 1920: 5). *Town Topics* continued publication after the Colonel’s death, and could still be purchased on New York newsstands when Fitzgerald satirized it in *The Great Gatsby*. Colonel Mann’s gossip, intimately tied to Colonel Mann’s blackmail, was part of the New York Fitzgerald knew. But why did the Colonel’s magazine bother him enough to satirize it in *Gatsby*?

### **Into the Fishbowl – Fitzgerald and the Culture of Celebrity**

Fitzgerald’s attention to America’s gossip culture in *Gatsby* mirrored the rise of a radically new cultural phenomenon. The *kind* of celebrity culture that developed in America during the early twentieth century was a phenomenon new in human history. Before that time, there had been famous people, but as Richard Schickel explains in *Intimate Strangers*, his history of celebrity culture, in previous eras fame was still linked to the latin idea of *fama*, “meaning ‘manifest deeds’” (24). Fame still related primarily to what people did; there was an idea that it was something earned. The invention of the rotary press in the late nineteenth century changed that. Now, able to reach masses of readers, journals needed to find ways to make millions of sales. In a short period of time, they gravitated to two things: photographs and scandals. Soon, Schickel notes, the first gossip magazines and the first tabloids appeared in America and, especially, in the country’s richest metropolis: New York. The media’s hunger for images coincided with the birth of Hollywood—and celebrity culture was born.



Hollywood's first fan magazine, *Photoplay*, was founded in 1910; *The Illustrated Daily News*, the first tabloid to combine big picture spreads with short articles, was founded in New York in 1919; and Hollywood's first major scandal, the "Fatty" Arbuckle rape case, took place between 1921 and 1922 (Schickel 37, 39, 50). Adela Rogers St. Johns, a Hollywood correspondent, later recalled the era's initial innocence: "Everybody had an excitement about the whole thing that I've never seen before. None of us knew even vaguely what we were doing . . . but it was great . . . right in the middle of this goldfish bowl, with everybody beginning to look at us" (qtd. in Schickel 39). Fitzgerald composed *Gatsby* during the years in which the early innocence of Hollywood was being replaced by the tabloid culture we know.

Along with her old copies of "*Town Tattle*," in her Manhattan apartment, Myrtle also has "some of the small scandal magazines of Broadway" (29); and at the train station, where she buys the most recent issue of "*Town Tattle*," she also purchases "a moving picture magazine" (27). Her acquiring both is an ironic comment on the thoughtlessness of her own behavior. Myrtle's stopping to buy magazines and a dog in Tom's company was not, within the new historical reality, either safe or anonymous. As Colonel Mann's 1906 libel trial had shown, agents for the new gossip magazines were everywhere. Several testified that Mann frequently reminded them that "*Town Topics* will pay more liberally than the daily papers for items of news in its own particular line" ("Col. Mann's Notes"). Tom was a member of the 400, a representative in the novel of the people most likely to be reported on in *Town Topics*—and to be blackmailed by it. He is also a fictitious representative of Long Islanders, who were particular victims of the Colonel's pages.

As an example, on 16 December 1920, the "Saunterings" section of *Town Topics* began, "When Long Island ceases to furnish the social annals of the day with food for gossip I suppose we may expect to hear immediately the joyful sound of Gabriel's trump." It went on to report the doings of a certain "Miss X" whose activities included going for motorcar rides at 2 a.m., arriving at lunches with a handsome young man "whose very good-looking wife would have something to say about the matter if she but knew" and sending cables filled with "love and kisses" to a "certain valiant knight in London." The section on "Miss X" concludes, "Gossip? Yes. But what else ever comes out of Long Island?" (1).

When Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby*, *Town Topics* was only one magazine in a flourishing gossip industry. In a study of American gossip magazines from the 1920s and 1930s, Will Straw has observed that the rise of competing technology meant that magazines had increasingly to adopt visual strategies and content designed to imitate the new forms of electronic media—

including the telegraph, the talking film, and radio. He notices that magazine headlines began figuratively to “shout” at readers through their use of large headlines and lurid photographs, and that in this way the print culture of the United States began to “seek graphic, textual equivalents for noise” (23). Among the gossipy news magazines present on New York’s newsstands while Fitzgerald lived in New York was a magazine unabashedly called *Gossip*, its cover art inviting the reader to look through a figurative peep hole to examine the lives of the people (including celebrities) whose personal stories appeared inside (see fig. 3). Within the historical context of a growing gossip industry, an industry that was focusing its attention precisely on rich aristocrats like Tom, Fitzgerald’s references to “*Town Tattle*” in *Gatsby* may initially seem like a minor detail, as do the Broadway fan magazines in Myrtle’s apartment, but when these details are read as what they were—evidence in their day of the new reality of America’s emerging celebrity culture—they take on decidedly more importance as symbols within the novel as a whole. Fitzgerald saw *Town Topics* as it really was: a tool for blackmail and the destruction of lives, a signpost on the road of an America falling away from Columbus’s glorious vision.

Fitzgerald’s allusions to the new gossip industry reflect the era’s historical reality and also a wider literary trend. We also see these concerns, for example, in Henry James’s *The Bostonians* (1886) when the corrupt journalist Mr. Pardon wishes to sell information on people’s personal lives for public consumption. Of him, the narrator says, “For this ingenuous son of his age all distinction between the person and the artist had ceased to exist; the writer was personal, the person food for newsboys, and everything and every one were every one’s business” (139). We are told that on behalf of a “vigilant public opinion” (139) he reports anything that he manages to cull from the hotel registers; as Mr. Pardon reflects, “He knew that was a charge that people brought against newspaper-men—that they were rather apt to cross the line” (142). Similarly, in her New York-based novel *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Edith Wharton included two characters who are reporters (Ned Winsett and M. Rivière) as a reminder of the role the media played in exposing private lives. Newland Archer understandably fears the media and, in particular, its possible reporting of his relationship with the married Madame Olenska: “Think of the newspapers—their vileness!” he exclaims. “It’s all stupid and narrow and unjust—but one can’t make over society” (111). Both James and Wharton recognized the new power of the media to celebrate lives, or to destroy them.

It was a pattern F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald were beginning to know first-hand by the time he wrote *The Great Gatsby*. As Ruth Prigozy explains, “We can now recognize that Fitzgerald’s life coincided with the rise of new



**Fig. 3.** *Gossip*. New York. 6 May 1921: Front cover. From the collection of Will Straw.

technology that created public personalities who, once in the public arena, often lost control of their carefully cultivated images. The Fitzgeralds became such victims of their own skill at manipulating mass media” (*F. Scott Fitzgerald* 4). As Fitzgerald himself remembered in “My Lost City” (1935), “a

dive into a civic fountain, a casual brush with the law, was enough to get us into the gossip columns” (27). And in 1939, in the midst of depression over failing finances and two broken fingers, Scott wrote to Zelda: “I never wanted the Zelda I married. I didn’t love you again till after you became pregnant. You—thinking I slept with that Bankhead—making all your drunks innocent + mine calculated till even *Town Topics* protested” (Bruccoli and Duggan 559).

Had the Colonel’s magazine reported their “drunks,” as Fitzgerald refers to them? Was that what called the magazine to mind after all those years? Perhaps (although I have not yet found any gossip on Scott and Zelda in the magazine). It seems more likely that in this letter Fitzgerald was referring generally to the gossip business, of which *Town Topics* was a part. Certainly, Fitzgerald knew what it was to be a celebrity, what it was to live in the goldfish bowl, with everyone beginning to look at you. And he wrote about it—in *Gatsby* and then again in *Tender Is the Night*, where his main character not only seemed to be a celebrity, as Jay Gatsby had been, but also, more importantly, is called one. In his introduction to Rosemary Hoyt in *Tender*, Fitzgerald has her think about the new age—one in which old certainties have been replaced by the new cult of personality, a world dominated by magazines like the Colonel’s. She thinks: “Her mother’s modest but compact social gift got them out of unwelcome situations swiftly and firmly. But,” Fitzgerald adds, “Rosemary had been a celebrity for only six months, and sometimes the French manners of her early adolescence and the democratic manners of America, these latter superimposed, made a certain confusion and let her in for just such things” (16).

If Fitzgerald’s allusions to “*Town Tattle*” in *Gatsby* give us some insight into the complexity of his response, by 1925, to his own celebrity status, they may also contain a link to his novel’s original design—his plan for a significant moral/religious presence in *Gatsby*, which has perhaps received less detailed attention than it deserves. When Fitzgerald began *The Great Gatsby*, he explained in a letter (which James L. W. West III highlights in his introduction to Fitzgerald’s early draft version of the novel) that this new work would take place in the “middle west and New York in 1885” and would have a “catholic element” (qtd. in West xiii). As we know, Fitzgerald eventually discarded his original 18,000 word draft, turning it into the Catholic-themed short story “Absolution,” published in H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan’s *American Mercury* in June 1924; but I do not believe that the “catholic element” Fitzgerald envisioned for his initial draft ever truly left the novel, and that, in fact, his attention to American gossip culture in *Gatsby* may reveal the continuing importance to him (at least artistically) of the kind of philosophical

discussions he had had during his early schooling with his mentor Monsignor Fay.

While some critics may question the extent to which I will argue here that Fitzgerald drew upon Christian ideas and Catholic teaching in his representation of gossip in *Gatsby*, I believe that this issue is, at the very least, worth continued exploration, because we may be doing a serious disservice to Fitzgerald if we underestimate the extent to which he was a sophisticated philosophical, even theological, thinker. Whatever his later religious beliefs may have been—and I do not pretend to know them—it is enough to recognize that Fitzgerald, like any artist, was capable of drawing on the heritage in which he had been raised for the themes and images that appear in his fiction. We know that Fitzgerald attended Catholic schools as a child and had even, at one point, believed he might have a calling to the priesthood (Prigozy, *F. Scott Fitzgerald* 22). We know as well that he idolized Monsignor Fay, who makes a thinly fictionalized appearance as “Father Darcy” in *This Side of Paradise* (Prigozy, *F. Scott Fitzgerald* 22). The facts of Fitzgerald’s early life and his own initial conception of *Gatsby* as a novel that would contain a strong “catholic element” both suggest that specifically *theological* ideas about gossip may, in fact, be more firmly implicated in the novel than we had previously believed.

As a child, Fitzgerald likely received instruction from the “Baltimore Catechism,” which was a nineteenth-century catechism for children intended for use in schools. Regardless of what catechism he used, however, it would have covered Christianity’s basic teachings, as interpreted in the Roman Catholic tradition. A child training for confirmation was asked, “Is it enough to belong to God’s Church in order to be saved?” To which the child replied, “It is not enough to belong to the Church in order to be saved, but we must also keep the Commandments of God and of the Church” (Third Plenary Council). The question “Which are the Commandments of God?” required the child’s recitation of the ten, from memory (Third Plenary Council). Fitzgerald was confirmed in 1910, when he was fourteen (Allen 18), an indication that he had successfully completed his catechismal training, including his knowledge of these questions. In his early fiction, Fitzgerald frequently expressed concern about what would come to replace religion as a moral guide in people’s lives once they had abandoned traditional religious belief, and in particular the moral guidance provided by the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments. This anxiety occurs throughout *This Side of Paradise*, so that although Amory considers himself beyond Christian morality, Eleanor shocks him when she says, “Thousands of scowling priests keeping the degenerate Italians and illiterate Irish repentant with gabble-gabble about the sixth and ninth commandments” (238–39). Later, as Amory “Becomes a Personage,” he thinks about the Church

of Rome and concludes, “Quite conceivably it was an empty ritual but it was seemingly the only assimilative, traditionary bulwark against the decay of morals. Until the great mobs could be educated into a moral sense some one must cry: ‘Thou shalt not!’” (281).

After writing *This Side of Paradise*, the idea of a society that had broken with its rules for moral conduct continued to preoccupy Fitzgerald. This issue is apparent in his 1923 play *The Vegetable*. Dada, the father-figure, wanders through the play making references to scripture; for the most part the other characters ignore him. While Fitzgerald obviously meant for his audience to laugh at this old man, it is impossible to miss the prophetic tone Fitzgerald occasionally gave his utterances: “The United States was the wealthiest country in all the world. It’s easier for a camel to pass through a needle’s eye than for a wealthy man to enter heaven. . . . So all the money in the Treasury I have had destroyed by fire, or dumped into the deep sea” (95). Fitzgerald makes it clear that this loss of faith is one of the central concerns of his generation. Neither the father (Dada) nor the son (Jerry) have all the answers, but the father is at least content, whereas the son is merely adrift:

DADA [*complacently*]. We’re all saved.

JERRY [*wildly*]. You mean we’re all lost! (95).

As period photographs displayed at a Hofstra University exhibit on “‘Our Local Heavens’: F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Years on Long Island and in New York City, 1922–1924” showed, the ash heaps traversed by Fitzgerald’s characters on their way into Manhattan in *The Great Gatsby* were a real “dumping ground in central Queens” (Goldleaf 8). As the show’s curator, Steven Goldleaf, explained, “whether taking the LIRR [Long Island Rail Road] between Great Neck and Manhattan, or driving his car, [Fitzgerald] had to traverse this enormous dumping ground for waste and ash” (8). In *Gatsby*, as we know, Fitzgerald made this real geographic setting a symbolic wasteland for his characters to traverse under T. J. Eckleburg’s watching God-like eyes. It is an image familiar to readers of the Bible from the central story of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Israelites wandered the wilderness for 40 years in search of a Promised Land and a Covenantal relationship with God. This idea of wandering without moral guidance in a wilderness of sin and despair was a powerful image for Fitzgerald, enough so that he later applied it to a personal tragedy. In December 1940, he wrote a beautiful letter to Scottie in which he attempted to explain to her what life was like for her mother; he described Zelda as one of those who are “mere guests on earth, eternal strangers carrying around broken decalogues that they cannot read” (*Letters to His Daughter* 164).

Although as a young man Fitzgerald rejected the Roman Catholic tradition in which he had been raised, a number of Fitzgerald scholars have commented on the connection between Fitzgerald's Christian upbringing and the profound religious sensibility in his work. In addition to Joan M. Allen's *Candles and Carnival Lights: The Catholic Sensibility of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (1978), which contains a chapter on Catholic symbolism in *Gatsby*, this idea also appears in Walter Raubicheck's "The Catholic Romanticism of *This Side of Paradise*" (2003); Stephen Tanner's "The Devil and F. Scott Fitzgerald" (2003); Steven Frye's "Fitzgerald's Catholicism Revisited: The Eucharistic Element in *The Beautiful and Damned*" (2000); and in Edward Gillin's "The Grace of 'Benediction'" (1996). Fitzgerald's interest in *religious* perspectives on moral issues (as his attention to religious guidelines for moral living in his first plays and novels reveals) seems to have remained an interest in *Gatsby*—a novel in which, in the aggregate, his characters break all of the Ten Commandments.

We might assume that these commandments are broken by chance, and not by conscious design, but what argues against that idea is how methodically Fitzgerald places the broken commandments throughout the novel. The story could not take place without two key commandments being broken: "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14) and "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife" (Exodus 20:17). But Fitzgerald finds ways to invoke the other commandments too. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). How many things—money, class, property, sex—are worshipped in the novel before God? The commandments say, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" (Exodus 20: 4) and yet in this novel we have a modern golden calf in the form of Gatsby's cream-colored car (64). "Honour thy father and thy mother" (Exodus 20: 12). How many parents in the novel are revered and obeyed? Nick's? Gatsby's? "Thou shalt not kill"; "Thou shalt not steal"; "Thou shalt not bear false witness" (Exodus 20: 13, 15–16). Lying, swindling, and manslaughter are all incorporated into the novel. Perhaps most impressive is the care with which Fitzgerald integrates small details pointing to the fact that commandments have been broken. "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain" (Exodus 20: 7): Think about Tom Buchanan's "God damned" (131). And with respect to the injunction to "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20: 8), Fitzgerald specifically informs us that Gatsby has parties "On Sunday morning" so that "while church bells rang in the villages alongshore, the world and its mistress returned to Gatsby's house and twinkled hilariously on his lawn" (61).

Fitzgerald would have known the Ten Commandments by heart. H. W. Häusermann argued years ago that Fitzgerald's "origin and his education in the somewhat old-fashioned but good Catholic Newman School in Lakewood,

New Jersey, undoubtedly left a deep and lasting impression on his works” (82). Moreover, as Edward Gillin has observed, Fitzgerald “doubtlessly received instruction from catechisms” that later influenced his work (42). The extent to which Fitzgerald paid attention to his early Catholic schooling is suggested by Eleanor’s linking, in *This Side of Paradise*, of “the sixth and ninth commandments” (239). As John A. Hardon explains in *The Catholic Catechism*, it was traditional in catechismal training to teach the sixth and ninth commandments as “two aspects of the same divine mandate” since these commandments against adultery and against coveting your neighbor’s wife “forbid respectively the external and internal sins against chastity” (351).

That Fitzgerald appears to have intentionally incorporated the Decalogue into *Gatsby* has not previously been noted by the novel’s critics, but this observation complements ideas previously argued by Bernard Tanner (who saw Christ-like attributes in *Gatsby*), and Henry Dan Piper, who suggested that “in a waste land, without moral sanctions of any kind,” idealists like *Gatsby* are “the most vulnerable of all” (332). If we assume Fitzgerald knew Christian teaching well enough to encode the Decalogue into his novel, it seems possible that other scriptural ideas appear there too. After all, both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament contain guideposts for moral living, the kind of “assimilative, traditionary bulwark” (281) Amory seeks in *Paradise*. In the epistles, one of the main instructions for Christian living concerns injunctions against the evil of gossip, an idea Fitzgerald wove into *Gatsby* through several methods, including his allusions to *Town Topics*. The Christian scriptures leave no doubt as to the moral issues involved. In the epistle to Titus, Paul wrote, “Put them in mind to . . . speak evil of no man” (3:1–2); and elsewhere, in the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul warned against, “debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults” (12:20). Perhaps the best-known scriptural comment on gossip appears, however, in the letter of James, with its pithy warning that “the tongue can no man tame; *it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison*” (James 3:8). “The tongue” James reminded the faithful, “*is a fire*” (James 3:6).

Gossip certainly bothered Fitzgerald. In a letter to Maxwell Perkins, on 1 June 1925, Fitzgerald expressed his anger at the rumor he was considering changing publishers:

. . . Rumors start like this.

Smith: (a born gossip) I hear Fitzgerald’s book isn’t selling. I think we can get him, as he’s probably blaming it on Scribners.



The Next Man: It seems Fitzgerald is dissatisfied with Scribners and Liveright is after him.

The Third Man: I hear Fitzgerald has gone over to Liverite [sic].  
(*A Life in Letters* 116)

On another occasion he wrote to Scottie, “What gossip! Let me remind you never to discuss my affairs with a living soul” (*Letters to His Daughter* 50).

The immorality of gossip is a major theme in *Gatsby*. The novel is filled with the sounds of people talking about one another, and with the action of people listening in. In fact, the novel is full of images reminiscent of the whispering females on the cover of Mann’s *Town Topics*. In recalling gossip he had heard about *Gatsby*, Nick says, “The two girls and Jordan leaned together confidentially. ‘Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once’” (44). Similarly, early in his meeting with Jordan, Nick notices she is trying to overhear Daisy and Tom: “she sat up alertly and said ‘Sh!’ in a warning voice. A subdued impassioned murmur was audible in the room beyond, and Miss Baker leaned forward unashamed, trying to hear” (14). Later, Daisy, Tom, and Jordan confront Nick with the news that he’s engaged: “We heard it from three people, so it must be true” (19). In her book on gossip in literature, Patricia Meyer Spacks notes of *Gatsby* that “all that happens in the novel happens in gossip’s shadow” (223). She argues that in many novels gossip performs a positive function, moving the plot forward and telling us about social relations, but not in *Gatsby*. In *Gatsby*, “gossip does not even, as in *Vanity Fair*, serve important emotional needs—expressing rage or envy or admiration, supplying entertainment. Nor does it fill any obvious social function.” Rather, Spacks suggests, “It merely fills the air, an almost tangible oppressive presence” (224).

Andrew Hook has observed that “*The Great Gatsby* is a novel of manners: it does comment on American society in the 1920s and it is critical of the corruption and moral disorder of the period” (57)—a moral disorder symbolized, to some extent, by Myrtle’s ability to go to the newsstand and buy intimate news about other New Yorkers. The tragic results of this simple act, as it occurred in reality, often appeared in the New York press, which reported on suicides that had been linked either to revelations made public through the Colonel’s magazine or to the threat of legal proceedings arising from acts of blackmail conducted on his behalf (Logan, *The Man* 56). Gossip in *Gatsby* is a sign of moral collapse—a fact reflective, I think, of both Fitzgerald’s Christian upbringing and his reportorial eye for the truth. After all, Colonel Mann’s blackmail, a product of his gossip magazine, was a tangible evil in Fitzgerald’s New York. Whatever Fitzgerald’s personal religious beliefs, his allusions to

“*Town Tattle*” in *Gatsby* underline his strong continuing interest (even once he had abandoned the idea of literally becoming a priest) of exploring—even “preaching” about—moral issues. As Fitzgerald explained in a late letter to Scottie, from 4 November 1939, “I guess I am too much a moralist at heart and really want to preach at people in some acceptable form rather than to entertain them” (*Letters to His Daughter* 102).

In the end, I believe that Fitzgerald’s attention to “*Town Tattle*” in *The Great Gatsby*—where it symbolizes the rise of tabloid journalism in America and the nation’s new fixation with the sale of gossip—may reveal some of the personal and professional concerns he was himself experiencing when he wrote the novel. There’s no question that, in some respects, Fitzgerald was perfectly capable of taking advantage of the new culture of celebrity. He had been consciously engaging in public displays—such as riding on the tops of taxis—as early as the publication of his first novel, likely with the express intent of using media attention as a means of increasing his novel’s sales (see Hamilton 43). It is also the case, of course, that from the beginning Fitzgerald was inordinately attentive to the publicity he attracted, keeping a detailed scrapbook of media stories on his work and life, his scrapbook containing articles proclaiming his celebrity status as a “Who’s Who” (Brucoli, Smith, and Kerr 71). While the references to “*Town Tattle*” that appear in *Gatsby* certainly reveal his journalistic tendency to capture the major changes of his time, I think that they also reveal the psychological complexity of his own response to his celebrity status.

Scottie’s birth in October 1921 seems to have contributed to a period of particular introspection for Fitzgerald, as suggested by “The Popular Girl,” a story written and published at almost exactly the same time as Scottie’s birth. In it, an alcoholic father is unable to provide for his daughter, leaving her alone (and poor) in a hostile world. The kind of fear for Scottie’s future that this story suggests may also underlie Fitzgerald’s pointed attention to New York gossip in *Gatsby*, because an author this sensitive about his daughter’s future may have already realized that if American tabloids were paying attention to him and to Zelda, they would one day be paying attention to his daughter too.

If it is true that Fitzgerald manipulated America’s nascent celebrity culture to his own ends, it is also the case that *Gatsby*’s allusions to “*Town Tattle*” may suggest Fitzgerald’s growing premonition that while the mechanisms of celebrity can be controlled, it is only to a certain extent. American tabloid culture gives fame while exacting a cost. Ruth Prigozy, who has written extensively on the subject of the Fitzgeralds’ celebrity, notes in her Fitzgerald biography that “the Fitzgeralds became such victims of their

own skill at manipulating mass media, as did such movie stars as Clara Bow and ‘Fatty’ Arbuckle, both victims of the machinery of Hollywood success and public morality” (*F. Scott Fitzgerald* 4). The fame that Scott and Zelda had already experienced by the time Fitzgerald composed *Gatsby* had likely already taught him—as all celebrities learn in time—how precious privacy is, and how dearly some aspects of his life would need to be protected. In a recent article on Grace Kelly, Anthony Lane nicely summarizes a situation that may also have applied to Fitzgerald in his time. Lane points out that Kelly led a paradoxical existence. She “chose to live and marry in the public glare” and yet her “kernel of privacy” was “keenly guarded” (69). If Fitzgerald’s allusions to “*Town Tattle*” in *Gatsby* hint at similar concerns with respect to the balance between publicity and privacy, those fears would be confirmed later, when he would know only too well how much publicity could hurt. In a tender letter to Scottie written near the end of his life, he explained that as the child of celebrities she would always be watched. “The world also will have an interest in the matter of your behavior,” he wrote. “It would like to be able to say, and would say on the slightest provocation: ‘There she goes—just like her papa and mama’” (*Letters to His Daughter* 58).

### Six Degrees of Separation: Fitzgerald and Colonel Mann

In addition to his thematic interest in America’s turn away from traditional morality towards celebrity culture, Fitzgerald may have had another personal reason for alluding to the Colonel’s magazine in *Gatsby*: and that was the indirect connection between himself and Colonel Mann. One of the ironies of Colonel Mann’s life was that in addition to being a scoundrel and a blackmailer, he seems to have had fairly good literary taste. As a result, he hired some particularly cultured people to work for *Town Topics* in the departments that covered cultural events. Over the course of the history of *Town Topics* a number of distinguished writers and critics worked for the magazine, including James Huneker, Percival Pollard, and Willard Huntington Wright. These intelligent, iconoclastic critics exercised considerable freedom in their review columns, since, as Andy Logan points out, “Busy devilling the Four Hundred, [Mann] left those department editors who dealt with extraneous aspects of civilization such as art, music, and literature to write—and to live—as they pleased” (*The Man* 212).

On at least one occasion that I have been able to discover (and there may certainly be more), F. Scott Fitzgerald owed a generally appreciative review to this magazine’s “Literary Show” department. In a review that appeared in *Town Topics* on 30 September 1920, “The Ringmaster” said that *Flappers and Philosophers* would “take the reader along in a state of willing servitude” because

the stories were “vital and spontaneous.” The unnamed reviewer expressed criticism concerning the superficial nature of the stories, and doubted that Fitzgerald would ever be able to write about more serious things, but ultimately the review’s tendency was to express the belief that Fitzgerald had brilliantly achieved the main thing he intended to achieve: to capture accurately the feeling of youth. In comments on “The Offshore Pirate,” the reviewer notes that “there is the element of youth to be accounted for and it is youth that wins—wins gloriously and for no other reason than because it is youth. And so with the stories themselves!” (15).

Fitzgerald’s other personal connection to the Colonel had to do with the very beginning of his career. Fitzgerald had moved to New York in the spring of 1919 with the hope of becoming a professional writer, but his first break did not come until that summer—after 122 rejections—when H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan, editors of New York’s literary monthly *The Smart Set*, bought “Babes in the Woods” from him. *The Smart Set*, the magazine to which Fitzgerald made his first professional sale, was founded in 1900—by Colonel William D’Alton Mann. Mann’s original idea was to sell literature to New York’s richest class, its “Smart Set”—possibly to provide himself with greater legitimacy and to deflect attention away from his infamous gossip magazine. He sold the *Smart Set* after only a few years, but the scandal his name brought with it never left and may have contributed to the magazine’s later audacity, and concomitant ability to promote such avant-garde young writers as James Joyce, Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence—and the young F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Edmund Wilson later recalled that he began reading *The Smart Set* in 1912 as a teenager, in part owing to the attraction presented by the “magazine’s variegated past” as a journal founded by the “blackmailing owner of *Town Topics*” (93–94). Was Fitzgerald aware of this link between himself and the Colonel? It seems likely that if Wilson knew of the connection between Mann and *The Smart Set*, Fitzgerald knew it too. If he did, his references to “*Town Tattle*” in *Gatsby* may have been both a reproof and a kind of acknowledgment: a nod to Fitzgerald’s own connection to a scandalous man, his magazines, and the part of New York history they shared.

## Notes

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1. For the history of *Town Topics*, see Logan, *The Man*; Logan, "That Was New York: Town Topics-I"; Logan, "That Was New York: Town Topics-II"; Mott; Pratte; and Rowe.
2. For reproductions of editorial cartoons from the *Town Topics*' scandal see Pratte 155 and Logan, *The Man* 35, [134], 183, [200].

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