

Public Abstract

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Title:The Creation of *The Four Million*: O. Henry's Influences and Working Methods

This study has two goals. First, it seeks to recover some of the social and historical context that made for the enormous impact of O. Henry's book *The Four Million* when it appeared in 1906. For several reasons--the passage of time, the fact that the stories are now most often encountered in scattered form in selections and anthologies, and the subsequent omission of the prefatory note to the original collection--readers today can be unaware that *The Four Million* was intended as an attack on the idea of the Four Hundred, which was the number of people said to really matter in New York society. Second, the paper seeks to fill in some gaps in the existing scholarship. While many writers have noted O. Henry's acknowledgment of his debt to Anne Partlan, whose magazine work inspired him to write about the shopgirls and other low-paid laborers in New York, none have examined that work to determine the nature of the influence. Finally, while there is much anecdotal evidence of O. Henry's habitual working methods, there has been no attempt at a compositional history of *The Four Million*, O. Henry's most important book.

In the first case, research centered on Ward McAllister, who is credited with coining the term "the Four Hundred" and who relentlessly promoted the idea to cement his position as a social arbiter. Existing studies of McAllister mention O. Henry only in passing, and studies of O. Henry likewise mention McAllister only in passing. In constructing a comparison of the two men, the main sources used, in addition to the secondary literature on O. Henry, were McAllister's memoir and accounts of his career and the genesis of the Four Hundred. In the case of Anne Partlan, research involved determining where O. Henry encountered her work and then tracking it down. A lone early source pointed to *Success* magazine, and by supplementing the incomplete microfilm record with archival copies, a complete collection of Partlan's contributions was assembled. In addition to the particular story that O. Henry cited, "Among Themselves," and the other pieces that Partlan published in *Success*, two pieces about Partlan herself were turned up. Research for a compositional history of *The Four Million* involved the collation of clues from the biographies of O. Henry, memoirs of his colleagues, and literary studies.

The comparison and contrast of O. Henry and McAllister provided a new way to take the measure of the social forces that *The Four Million* was reacting against. An unexpected result was the discovery that McAllister and the Four Hundred had been widely ridiculed in the press for years before the book appeared and that O. Henry was therefore following rather than leading the charge against the social elite. The unearthing and examination of Partlan's work was also surprising: rather than documentary glimpses of the lives of shopgirls, her pieces for *Success* were mostly moral tales with indeterminate settings. Some interesting connections were found, however, between "Among Themselves" and O. Henry's "The Furnished Room." The attempt at a compositional history of *The Four Million* was necessarily inconclusive, but gathering the evidence in one place did enable the formation of some tentative conclusions about how much O. Henry was involved in the selection and arrangement of stories for the book and how much was left to his publisher and others.

The results demonstrate that some established ideas about O. Henry--that he deserves considerable credit for pushing back against the idea of the Four Hundred and that he moved in on Anne Partlan's territory when he started writing about shopgirls--are not borne out by the facts. These ideas, propagated by his earliest biographers and critics and accepted at face value by subsequent scholars, must be revised, and other received notions tested against original sources. In examining "Among Themselves" and the rest of Partlan's work in *Success*, and in assembling material for a genetic approach to *The Four Million*, this study indicates new directions for further examination of O. Henry's influences and working methods.