

**Margaret Sanger, from “Happiness in Marriage” (1926)**

*At the turn of the 20th century, birth control was considered to be immoral and radical. A married woman who wanted information regarding birth control was advised to get a divorce so that her husband could marry a proper wife who was willing to perform her biological duty. Birth control threatened patriarchy and was widely believed to contribute to promiscuity.*

*This attitude would gradually change due to the tireless efforts of Margaret Sanger. As a young woman, Sanger had witnessed the death of her mother at the age of 43 after delivering 11 children. Sanger herself had felt trapped and unfulfilled as a wife and mother. As a nurse she witnessed the plight of poor women who were unable to support unplanned children and afford proper medical care. In addition, she often witnessed the results of desperate attempts at illegal abortions.*

*Beginning in 1914, Sanger worked to educate women about birth control and to make inexpensive contraception available. As a result, she was indicted under the Comstock Act, an 1873 law that outlawed the publication or distribution of information regarding contraception and abortion. Sanger also founded the American Birth Control League, the forerunner to the Planned Parenthood organization of today. The document reproduced below conveys her attitudes regarding marriage in the 1920s.*

We must recognize that the whole position of womanhood has changed today. Not so many years ago it was assumed to be a just and natural state of affairs that marriage was considered as nothing but a preliminary to motherhood. A girl passed from the guardianship of her father or nearest male relative to that of her husband. She had no will, no wishes of her own. Hers not to question, but merely to fulfill duties imposed upon her by the man into whose care she was given.

Marriage was synonymous with maternity. But the pain, the suffering, the wrecked lives of women and children that such a system caused, show us that it did not work successfully. Like all other professions, motherhood must serve its period of apprenticeship.

Today women are on the whole much more individual. They possess as strong likes and dislikes as men. They live more and more on the plane of social equality with men. They are better companions. We should be glad that there is more enjoyable companionship and real friendship between men and women.

This very fact it is true, complicates the marriage relation, and at the same time ennoble. Marriage no longer means the slavish subservience of the woman to the will of the man. It means, instead, the union of two strong and highly individualized natures. Their first problem is to find out just what the terms of this partnership are to be. Understanding full and complete cannot come all at once, in one revealing flash. It takes time to arrive at a full and sympathetic understanding of each other, and mutually to arrange lives to increase this understanding. Out of the mutual adjustments, harmony must grow and discords gradually disappear.

These results cannot be obtained if the problem of parenthood is thrust upon the young husband and wife before they are spiritually and economically prepared to meet it. For naturally the coming of the first baby means that all other problems must be thrust aside. That baby is a great fact, a reality that must be met. Preparations must be made for its coming. The layette must be prepared. The doctor must be consulted. The health of the wife may need consideration. The young mother will probably prefer to go to the hospital. All of these preparations are small compared to the regime after the coming of the infant.

Now there is a proper moment for every human activity, a proper season for every step in self-development. The period for cementing the bond of love is no exception to this great truth. For only by the full and glorious living through these years of early marriage are the foundations of an enduring and happy married life rendered possible. By this period the woman attains a spiritual freedom. Her womanhood has a chance to bloom. She wins mastery over her own destiny; she acquires self-reliance, poise, strength, a youthful maturity. She abolishes fear. Incidentally, few of us realize, since the world keeps no repugnance by young mothers who are the victims of undesired maternity. Nor has science yet determined the possibilities of a generation conceived and born of conscious desire.

In the wife who has lived through a happy marriage, or whom the bonds of passionate love have been fully cemented, maternal desire is intensified and matured. Motherhood becomes for such a woman not a penalty or punishment, but the road by which she travels onward toward completely rounded self-development. Motherhood thus helps her toward the unfolding and realization of her higher nature.

Her children are not mere accidents, the outcome of chance. When motherhood is a mere accident, as so often it is in the early years of careless or reckless marriages, a constant fear of pregnancy may poison the days and nights of the young mother. Her marriage is thus converted into a tragedy. Motherhood becomes for her a horror instead of a joyfully fulfilled function.

Instead of being a self-determined and self-directing love, everything is henceforward determined by the sweet tyranny of the child. I have known several young mothers, despite a great love for the child, to rebel against this intolerable situation. Vaguely feeling that this new maternity has rendered them unattractive to their husbands, slaves to a deadly routine of bottles, baths and washing, they have revolted. I know of the innumerable marriages which have been wrecked by premature parenthood.

Love has ever been blighted by the coming of children before real foundations of marriage have been established. Quite aside from the injustice done to the child who has been brought accidentally into the world, this lamentable fact sinks into insignificance when compared to the injustice inflicted by chance upon the young couple, and the irreparable blow to their love occasioned by premature or involuntary parenthood.

For these reasons, in order that harmonious and happy marriage may be established as the foundation for happy homes and the advent of healthy and desired children, premature

parenthood must be avoided. Birth Control is the instrument by which this universal problem may be solved.

### **Document Analysis**

What changes did Sanger describe in married relations in recent generations?

What changes did Sanger hope would come about if unplanned pregnancies could be prevented?

Do debates concerning birth control and unplanned pregnancies still occur in the United States? Are Sanger's points still relevant?