

A Summary of *Killer Angel:* *The Biography of Margaret Sanger*

All page references are to the 2014 edition of *Killer Angel* by George Grant. If this summary interests you, please consider purchasing his [illuminating book](#).

Childhood

Margaret Sanger was born on September 14, 1879 in upstate New York, the sixth of eleven children. Margaret's father, Michael Higgins, served under General William Sherman who viciously destroyed many cities in Georgia. In that campaign, Higgins "achieved notable infamy among his peers when he was honored by his commander for special treachery in fiercely subduing the recalcitrant captive population" (3).

Upon returning from the war, Michael was a wandering stonemason and an outspoken mocker of religion. Margaret's mother was a devout Catholic and for a brief season Margaret expressed similar devotion, always keeping her devotion a secret from her father. Sadly, when her mother died, so did her devotion for the Lord. "Bitter, lonely, and grief-stricken, . . . her passion for Christ collapsed into a bitter hatred of the church" (5).

Adopting her father's hatred for religion, Margaret went to a finishing school associated with Claverack College. There, "she plunged into radical politics, suffragette feminism, and unfettered sex" (6). Such passions inhibited her studies and she quickly dropped out of school. Like her roving father, she floundered from being a kindergarten teacher to a nurse to marriage. Significantly, though she reported herself as a nurse, she never completed any nursing degree.

Marriage, Social Change, and Sex

In 1900 Margaret met William Sanger, an architect who lived and worked in New York City. They quickly married and the young husband sought to please his "temperamental bride" (9). In this period time, Margaret pursued the life of a material girl---shopping, collecting, and vacationing. In short, nothing please Margaret, nor did anything grab her attention, until she came in contact with certain radical ideologues, colleagues that William introduced her to.

In particular, Margaret came under the influence of John Reed, a Marxist "who would later gain fame as a propagandist for the Bolshevik's in Soviet Russia" (11). Compelled by the charismatic Reed, Margaret became "completely radicalized." In short time, she left behind her roving past and became a consumer of Marxist and anarchist ideology (11). William and Margaret's home became a meeting place for revolutionaries, as she would say later,

Our living room became a gathering place where liberals, anarchists, Socialists, and IWW's could meet. These vehement individualists had to have an audience, preferably a small, intimate one. Any evening you might find visitors being aroused by Jack Reed, bullied by Bill Haywood, or led softly towards anarchism by Alex Berkman. When throats grew dry and the flood of oratory waned, someone went out for hamburgers, sandwiches, hot dogs, and beer. The luxuriousness of the midnight repast depended upon the collection of coins tossed into the middle of the table, which consisted of what everybody had in his pocket. Those were halcyon days, indeed. (Herman Schwartz, *Margaret Sanger: A Biography*, 44; cited by Grant, *Killer Angel*, 12).

From 1901 to 1912, the Socialist Party in America grew from ten thousand to more than 100,000 members (16), and the Sangers were in the thick of that fervor. Adding to her feminist leanings, the Social Party's stance on women's suffrage, sexual liberation, feminism, and birth control fueled Margaret's passions (18). At first, Margaret's radical conversion energized their home, but soon it became all consuming. William became disturbed by her zeal and worked to save his marriage. In time, however, his efforts were in vain. As a family friend reported,

It was rather sad. She was like a raging river overflowing the banks of conventionality and propriety. He was like the small householder attempting vainly to keep the floods from washing away his home and property. It was inevitable that the two would be at odds, one with another. (Francis Gannon, *Biographical Dictionary of the Left* [Belmont, MA: Western Islands, 1973], 4:313; cited by Grant, *Killer Angel*, 19)

During this period, Margaret continued to feed on radical ideas. First, she met Emma Goldman who "made her living selling her Anarchist magazine *Mother Earth* and distributing leaflets on contraception and liberated sex" (21). Next, she encountered Havelock Ellis, whose seven-volume *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, "stirred her lust for lust" (22). Indeed, it was during this period that her obsession with sex erupted.

She told her husband "she needed emancipation from every taint of Christianized capitalism---including the strict bonds of marriage" (22). She also began to attend social gatherings to discuss various ideas; her topic of choice was always sex. And she became a leading purveyor of sexual liberation. Mabel Dodge, the owner of the salon where these discussions occurred, wrote with stunned candor about Margaret Sanger,

Margaret Sanger was a Madonna type woman, . . . It was she who introduced us all to the idea of birth control, and it, along with other related ideas about sex, became her passion. It was as if she had been more or less arbitrarily chosen by the powers-that-be to voice a new gospel of not only sex-knowledge in regard to conception, but sex-knowledge in regard to copulation and its intrinsic importance. She was the first person I ever knew who was openly an ardent propagandist for the joys of the flesh. This, in those days, was radical indeed when the sense of sin was still so indubitably mixed with the sense of pleasure.

Margaret personally set out to rehabilitate sex. She was one of its first conscious promulgators. (Madleine Gray, *Margaret Sanger*, 58--59; cited by Grant, *Killer Angel*, 25).

Not surprisingly, Margaret's marriage to William would not survive Margaret's lust for liberated sex. And on a trip to Paris---another effort of William to save his marriage---she separated from him.

The Abortion Advocate

Returning to the United States by herself, Margaret supported herself through writing various pamphlets advocating feminism, sexual liberty, and abortifacients. In this writing, Margaret violated the Comstock Laws, which were written in 1873 to outlaw various pornographic material from entering the mail. In the first of a series of papers entitled *The Woman Rebel*, she "denounced marriage as 'a degenerate institution,' capitalism as 'indecent exploitation,' and sexual modesty as 'obscene prudery'" (32). After this she took up other topics including contraception, sexual liberation, and other political issues (32).

In short, she had become a woman on fire for sexual liberation and family limitation. In fact, this was the title of the last pamphlet she wrote before fleeing the country to avoid trial for breaking the Comstock Laws (32--33). In this pamphlet, her advocacy for abortion became most clear as it "recommended such things as 'Lysol douches,' 'bichloride or mercury elixirs,' 'heavy doses of laxatives,' and 'herbal abortifacients'" (33).

Leaving America for England, Sanger spent a year in exile. Yet, her time was not wasted. Meeting with other radical groups, she came in contact with the ideas of Thomas Malthus and his population control. Here's a sample of his views:

All children born, beyond what would be required to keep up the population to a desired level, must necessarily perish, unless room be made for them by the deaths of grown persons... Therefore... we should facilitate, instead of foolishly and vainly endeavoring to impede, the operations of nature in producing this mortality; and if we dread the too frequent visitation of the horrid form of famine, we should sedulously encourage the other forms of destruction, which we compel nature to use. Instead of recommending cleanliness to the poor, we should encourage contrary habits. In our towns we should make the streets narrower, crowd more people into the houses, and court the return of the plague. In the country, we should build our villages near stagnant pools, and particularly encourage settlements in all marshy and unwholesome situations. But above all, we should reprobate specific remedies for ravaging diseases; and restrain those benevolent, but much mistaken men, who have thought they were doing a service to mankind by projecting schemes for the total extirpation of particular disorders. (Allan Chase, *The Legacy of Malthus: The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism*, 7; cited by Grant, *Killer Angel*, 36).

Under the influence of Malthus, Margaret's penchant for birth control, abortion, and eugenics grew. In fact, during this era of time eugenics (= good + genes) grew in popularity on both sides of the Atlantic. And when Margaret returned to America, she would pursue the purity of the races and the limitation of family through abortion.

Still, her time in England was not just spent reading Malthus; it also included numerable sexual dalliances with leading thinkers of the day (43). Such personal relations would come into play later when she went searching for legitimacy and support, but it also fueled her commitment to sexual liberty. Most importantly, she spent time with Havelock Ellis, whose sexual deviancy in England rivals the later work of Alfred Kinsey in America. In her affair with Ellis, she received important counsel for bringing her beliefs into effect in America.

Margaret would have to tone down her rabid pro-abortion stance, of course. And she would have to take charge of her children---as distasteful as that chore would be for her---in an effort to rehabilitate her image. She would also, he said, have to distance herself from revolutionary rhetoric. The scientific and philanthropic-sounding themes of Malthus and Eugenics would have to replace the politically charged themes of old-line labor Anarchism and Socialism. (Grant, *Killer Angel*, 44)

Truly, this is what she did and with chilling success.

The Start of Planned Parenthood

Returning to the United States, Margaret Sanger opened her first birth control clinic in 1916. "Following her Malthusian Eugenic instincts, she opened her clinic in the Brownsville section of New York, an area populated by newly immigrated Slavs, Latins, Italians, and Jews. She targeted the 'unfit' for her crusade to 'save the planet.' (45)

An illegal venture, the authorities shut down this clinic, but that did not stop her. She responded by starting the Birth Control League and *The Birth Control Review* (45), in order to gain public support. Though opposed by names like Billy Sunday and Teddy Roosevelt, she also began to receive vast amounts of money and articles from men like H.G. Wells, Karl Menninger, and Harry Emerson Fosdick—the famous modernist, New York City preacher.

With this outpouring of support, she led an international conference on birth control and lectured on the topic throughout the world. She also wrote, including *The Pivot of Civilization*, which "unashamedly called for the elimination of 'human weeds,' for the 'cessation of chastity,' for the segregation of 'morons, misfits, and the maladjusted,' and for the sterilization of 'genetically inferior races.'" (Margaret Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization*, 101; cited by Grant, *Killer Angel*, 46).

In these writings, she continued to espouse eugenic beliefs. In fact, until the atrocities of Nazi Germany were discovered, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Birth Control

League was led by known Eugenicists (50). And Sanger's "greatest aspiration was 'to create a race of thoroughbreds,' by encouraging amore [*sic*] children from the fit, and less from the unfit" (50). Such commitment to purify the human race, led Sanger to call for selective sterilization and something known as the "Negro Project" (51–52).

Targeting southern states in 1939, Margaret designed a "Negro Project" which would improve the conditions of human race in the South. What was the problem? In her mind, bad genes. With her commitments to eugenics, she saw the proliferation of "Negroes" as a "[dysgenic](#) horror" (52). And worse, she and the Birth Control League sought to recruit black ministers to help implement this program. George Grant reports the wicked racism of this scheme as he quotes from Sanger,

Her project aimed to hire three or four "Colored Ministers, preferably with social-service backgrounds, and with engaging personalities" to travel to various Black enclaves and propagandize for birth control. (52)

Again quoting Sanger,

"The most successful educational approach to the Negro . . . is through a religious appeal. We do not want word to go out that we want to exterminate the Negro population and the Minister is the man who can straighten out that idea if it ever occurs to any of their more rebellious members." (52–53)

Whatever the forms of racism were present and socially acceptable in the 1920s and 1930s, Sanger's penchant for population control goes further. For all the ways [feminist historians paint Sanger with an altruistic brush](#), her eugenic ideals betray any humanitarian uplift for Southern blacks. The end result is a targeted approach to the African-American community, which continues unabated to this day (see "[Abortion and Race](#)" by [Abort 73](#)).

The International Reach of Planned Parenthood

In 1925 Sanger organized the "international neo-Malthusian and birth control conference" in New York City. This conference brought people from all over the world and furthered the cause of birth control and especially birth control aimed at restricting the proliferation of uneducated children. As Sanger spoke at that conference, she took aim at the conditions in America,

The government of the United States deliberately encourages and even makes necessary by its laws the breeding-with a breakneck rapidity-of idiots, defectives, diseased, feebleminded, and criminal classes. Billions of dollars are expended by our state and federal governments and by private charities and philanthropies for the care, the maintenance, and the perpetuation of these classes. Year by year their numbers are mounting. Year by year more money is expended... to maintain an increasing race of morons which threaten the very foundations of our civilization. (Cited by Grant, *Killer Angel*, 57--58)

These sentiments capture the spirit that drove Margaret Sanger. For her, charity for the uneducated and infirm was a moral evil and "healthcare" for women always included the termination of pregnancies, but especially among women not fit to have children. Such commitments led her to open local clinics, but even more Sanger's speaking at this conferences foreshadowed the rest of her life.

At the helm of the Birth Control League, later renamed Planned Parenthood, Sanger would be the leading spokeswoman for birth control and abortion. And the success she garnered is staggering. Consider just a few of ways her public activism shaped future generations. (What follows is a summary of pages 62--64)

- In 1938, Sweden became historically Christian nation to legalize abortion.
- Eleven other European nations legalized abortion between 1949--1956.
- In 1958 Planned Parenthood received monies from the United Nations for programs in the developing world.
- In 1962 the American Law Institute proposed abortion laws be decriminalized.
- In 1967 the American Medical Association changed its stance on abortion, no longer protecting the unborn.
- In 1968 the United Kingdom legalized abortion. That same year Pope Paul VI reaffirmed the Catholic Church's stance on the sanctity of life. He was a singular Christian voice in this period of time.
- In 1970 Hawaii, Alaska, Washington, and New York enacted abortion-on-demand legislation.
- In 1973, *Roe v. Wade* made abortion on demand legal in all fifty states.

These are the legal changes that Sanger catalyzed with her activism, but her work to develop a birth control pill had perhaps an even greater impact on culture. As Mary Eberstadt has chronicled in [Adam and Eve after the Pill](#), the birth control pill separated sex and procreation, unleashing a world of sexual chaos and procreative confusion. And who was behind the creation of the birth control pill? Margaret Sanger.

Like so many of Sanger's other relationships, she met Gregory Pincus at a dinner party in 1951. An endocrinologist who created a test tube rabbit in 1934, Pincus received encouragement from Sanger to work on a [birth control pill](#). And with Margaret finding money for the research, the FDA approved the pill in 1960, paving the way for the sexual revolution and of course, the need for more abortions, when the pill didn't work.

The End of the Story

If we judge Sanger's life based on impact and influence, she stands at the top of the twentieth century. Few men or women did more to shape our brave new world. Today Planned Parenthood continues Sanger's vision and as Alan Guttmacher, the man who succeeded her as president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America put it, "We are merely walking down the path that Mrs. Sanger carved out for us" (80).

But Sanger's impact goes far beyond one organization. Her way of thinking, cleansed of its eugenic extremes, continues unabated to this day. And the culture of death which leads women to look at their fertility as a hindrance to their liberty---be it sexual, economic, or physical---grates against the glorious gift of nurturing and sheltering life which God designed the woman's body to have.

Still, if there's anything we can learn from Margaret's life, it may come from her own personal narrative. With an endless obsession for illicit sex and money and power, her own body eventually broke down, her body gave out, and she died at the age of 87. Indeed, for Sanger like everyone of us, we will have to give an account for the way we spent our years.

For her, she has had a massive impact on the world. But tragically, the historical record shows that the impact is spotted with tiny graves and bloody hands. Thankfully, there is greater one with bloody hands—only his hands did not shed the blood of others; he volunteered himself to die so that other might live.

In a complete reversal of the Planned Parenthood narrative, Jesus Christ laid down his life so that his posterity would live. Indeed, *because* he laid down his life, he was given authority over all flesh (John 17:2). And thus he has the right to judge the living and the dead. And one day he will, even bringing to life all the children killed through abortion. Then, he will also raise and restore all those women who were deceived by Planned Parenthood and had abortions, but who have also come to find forgiveness and healing in his blood.

This is the good news we find in the gospel of Jesus Christ. A gospel that not only offers salvation, but one that promises full and final justice, when the Lord returns. On that day, the works of Margaret Sanger will come before the all-searching eye of God. And for those who have shed innocent blood *without repentance*, their end will be far worse than the children who die in the womb. Justice will be served. In truth, this is the great and final judgment, which will set the world aright, which will wipe away every tear, and which will make all things new.

Until that day, therefore, let us tell others the pardoning, healing gospel and labor to see abortion ended in our day as women find physical and spiritual and relational help from the people of Christ and not Planned Parenthood. To that end this summary is written, so that others might be freed from the path of Margaret Sanger and her way of death.