

# ALMEIDA THEATRE

## 'The Morality of Birth Control' by Margaret Sanger

### The Speech

- Watch the speech delivered by Noma Dumezweni

Duration: 8 minutes 30 seconds

<https://www.speech.almeida.co.uk/speech/morality-of-birth-control>

- Discuss students' initial responses.

### Context

Margret Sanger was a birth control activist, writer and nurse. In 1916 she opened the first family planning and birth control clinic in America. In 1921 she established the American Birth Control League that later became the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

- Ask students to find out the answers to the following questions:
  - Why did Margaret Sanger leave America and flee to England in 1914?
  - What were the Comstock laws?
  - Why did Margaret Sanger spend 30 days in prison?
  - How was Margaret Sanger associated with the eugenics movement?
- Ask students to compare attitudes to birth control in the 1920s with attitudes now.

### Content

- Make notes on the central issues that are explored in this speech:
  - The morality of women
  - The rights of women
  - The capability of women
  - The issue of population and responsible parenting
- To what extent is the content of the speech logic and reasoning rather than emotion?
- To what extent is the final part of the speech shocking to a modern audience? Explain why.

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## Language and Structure

- Ask students to read a copy of the speech and explore the rhetorical devices used. **A transcript of the speech is included at the end of this document.**
- This exercise encourages students to identify features of rhetorical language, and more importantly to comment on their effect.
- Provide students with the chart below. This exercise could be done individually with each student completing the full table or by splitting the class in to groups and allocating three lines of the table to each group and asking them to feedback on one.

Language/ Structural Device	Example	Effect
Themes and Key Words		
Expert language, facts and statistics		
Types of repetition e.g. repetition of a single word or repetition of a phrase or repetition of an idea		
Rhetorical questions		
Pronouns and modes of addressing audience		
Counter argument		
Lists		

## Discussion

- Watch the discussion between Noma Dumezweni and members of Women Inspiring New Generations.

Duration: 4 minutes 20 seconds

<https://www.speech.almeida.co.uk/reaction/morality-of-birth-control>

- Discuss with your students how culture plays an important role in the way societies view birth control today.

## Useful Links

### Websites

[Margaret Sanger Biography](#) – Planned Parenthood

[Margaret Sanger](#) – National Women’s History Museum

[Eugenics](#) – a brief introduction from the Science Museum

[Empowerment through Contraception](#) - Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

[A Brief History of Birth Control](#) – Birth Control in America

[A History of Family Planning Services](#) – Birth Control in the UK

[Contraception and Family Planning Worldwide](#) – Interactive page analysing data on contraception use

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## THE MORALITY OF BIRTH CONTROL Margaret Sanger | 18 November 1921

*This is an edited version of the speech originally scheduled to be delivered at the close of the first American Birth Control Conference on 13 November 1921 until Margaret was arrested by the police. She returned five days later and eventually gave her speech on 18 November at the Park Theatre in New York City.*

The one issue upon which there seems to be most uncertainty and disagreement exists in the moral side of the subject of birth control.

Is over-population a menace to the peace of the world?

Would the legal dissemination of scientific birth control information be the most logical method of checking the problem of over-population?

Would knowledge of birth control change the moral attitude of men and women toward the marriage bond or lower the moral standards of the youth of the country?

Do you believe that knowledge which enables parents to limit the families will make for human happiness, and raise the moral, social and intellectual standards of population?

When one speaks of moral, one refers to human conduct. This implies action of many kinds, which in turn depends upon the mind and the brain.

We know that every advance that woman has made in the last half century has been made with opposition, all of which has been based upon the grounds of immorality. When women fought for higher education, it was said that this would cause her to become immoral and she would lose her place in the sanctity of the home. When women asked for the franchise it was said that this would lower her standard of morals, that it was not fit that she should meet with and mix with the members of the opposite sex, but we notice that there was no objection to her meeting with the same members of the opposite sex when she went to church.

The church has ever opposed the progress of woman on the ground that her freedom would lead to immorality. We ask the church to have more confidence in women. We ask the opponents of this movement to reverse the methods of the church, which aims to keep women moral by keeping them in fear and in ignorance, and to inculcate into them a higher and truer morality based upon knowledge. And ours is the morality of knowledge. If we cannot trust woman with the knowledge of her own body, then I claim that two thousand years of Christian teaching has proved to be a failure.

We stand on the principle that birth control should be available to every adult man and woman. We believe that every adult man and woman should be taught the responsibility and the right use of knowledge. We claim that woman should have the right over her own body and to say if she shall or if she shall not be a mother, as she sees fit. We further claim that the first right of a child is to be desired. While the second right is that it should be conceived in love, and the third, that it should have a heritage of sound health.

There are laws in this country which forbid the imparting of practical information to the mothers of the land. We claim that every mother in this country has the right to the best, the safest, the most scientific information.

Our first step is to have the backing of the medical profession so that our laws may be changed, so that motherhood may be the function of dignity and choice, rather than one of ignorance and chance. Conscious control of offspring is now becoming the ideal and the custom in all civilised countries. Those who oppose it claim that however desirable it may be on economic or social grounds, it may be abused and the morals of the youth of the country may be lowered. Such people should be reminded that there are two points to be considered. First, that such control is the

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inevitable advance in civilisation. Every civilisation involves an increasing forethought for others, even for those yet unborn. The reckless abandonment of the impulse of the moment and the careless regard for the consequences, is not morality.

In the second place, it is not only inevitable, but it is right to control the size of the family for by this control and adjustment we can raise the level and the standards of the human race. While nature's way of reducing her numbers is controlled by disease, famine and war, primitive man has achieved the same results by infanticide, exposure of infants, the abandonment of children, and by abortion. But such ways of controlling population is no longer possible for us. We have attained high standards of life, and along the lines of science must we conduct such control. We must begin farther back and control the beginnings of life. We must control conception. This is a better method, it is a more civilised method, for it involves not only greater forethought for others, but finally a higher sanction for the value of life itself.

Society is divided into three groups. Those intelligent and wealthy members of the upper classes who have obtained knowledge of birth control and exercise it in regulating the size of their families. They have already benefited by this knowledge, and are today considered the most respectable and moral members of the community. They have only children when they desire, and all society points to them as types that should perpetuate their kind.

The second group is equally intelligent and responsible. They desire to control the size of their families, but are unable to obtain knowledge or to put such available knowledge into practice.

The third are those irresponsible and reckless ones having little regard for the consequence of their acts, or whose religious scruples prevent their exercising control over their numbers. Many of this group are diseased, feeble-minded, and are of the pauper element dependent entirely upon the normal and fit members of society for their support. There is no doubt in the minds of all thinking people that the procreation of this group should be stopped. For if they are not able to support and care for themselves, they should certainly not be allowed to bring offspring into this world for others to look after. We do not believe that filling the earth with misery, poverty and disease is moral. And it is our desire and intention to carry on our crusade until the perpetuation of such conditions has ceased.

We desire to stop at its source the disease, poverty and feeble-mindedness and insanity which exist today, for these lower the standards of civilization and make for race deterioration. We know that the masses of people are growing wiser and are using their own minds to decide their individual conduct. The more people of this kind we have, the less immorality shall exist. For the more responsible people grow, shall they attain real morality.