Margaret Sanger Essay, Research Paper

When a motherhood becomes the fruit of a deep yearning, not the result of ignorance or accident, its children will become the foundation of a new race.” (Margaret Sanger, 1) Margaret Sanger, known as the founder of birth control, declared this powerful statement. It is reality that the rights that are customary for women in the twentieth century have been the product of the arduous physical and mental work of many courageous women. These individuals fought for the right for women to be respected in both mind and body by bestowing on them the rights to protect their femininity and to gain the equivalent respect given to men. A remarkable woman named Margaret Sanger is the individual who incredibly contributed to the feministic revolution that took place in the 1920 s. Her legacy of making the right to use birth control legal for woman is a precedent in history for the foundation of the equal rights battle that is still being fought today. By giving control back to the women in their sexuality, Margaret Sanger also restored confidence in those women who felt that their lives revolved around pregnancy. She has become an influential icon to women all around the world who enjoy the security of birth control that gives them the freedom in their sexuality on a daily bases.

Margaret Sanger, a feminist and birth control pioneer, was born in Corning New York, the sixth of eleven children and the third of four daughters of Anne Higgins and Michael Higgins, both of Irish descent. Michael Higgins, an atheist and socialist, owned a monument shop and carved statuary for tombstones. Anne Higgins, a devout Catholic, was a strong-willed woman who died at the age of forty-nine of tuberculosis, worn out, in her daughter s view, and died from bearing and birthing and raising 11 children (Murphy, 1). This destiny was an important element in Margaret Sanger s desire to find a way for women to achieve control over their own reproductive power. Her father s influence was also a strong one. Her father was said to be a free thinker and outspoken radical (About Margaret Sanger, 1) Although he was something of an autocrat, she admired him for his advocacy of liberal issues, including woman suffrage and tax reform, which he discussed with her as his intellectual equal. He was an indifferent businessman, and the two eldest daughters were compelled to leave school early to go to work. Sanger recognized the bravery in her father and was driven to measure the amount of courage within herself. Margaret resented the family s poverty and lack of status and blamed the Catholic teaching, which promoted the bearing of many children without regard to the parent s ability to support them. Her early life consisted of a search for personal power and autonomy. Margaret, at a very young age, was convinced that she would always be able to do what she set out to do. When her eighth grade teacher teased her in class, she refused to return to school. With the help of her older sisters, she attended Claverack College. (Katz, 1) This was a secondary school in New York, where she earned her room and board by waiting on tables and washing dishes. After graduation, she taught briefly in Little Falls, New Jersey, and then returned home to take care of her mother, who died in March 1896. Michael Higgins expected his daughter to continue taking care of the household, but in the spring of 1899, she acquired a job as a nurse probationer at White Plains Hospital in White Plains, New York. She underwent several operations for tubercular glands, but by 1902, she had completed two years of practical-nurse training. In August, she married William Sanger, and architect, artist, and socialist. Through her work as a nurse, Margaret witnessed many traumatic experiences that would change the course of her life forever. Through her working experience, she saw women deprived of their health, sexuality, and ability to care for their already born children. During this time, she saw many women die of very preventable deaths due to child labor, and horrible methods of self-induced abortion. (About Margaret Sanger, 1)

It was during the 20 s that the battle between modernization and traditionalism was at it s highest. (About Margaret Sanger, 2) The 1920s was a time of great revolution and change for America. During this time, many new ideas and leads in arts and entertainment, sports, politics, public and social affairs, and crime and punishment skyrocketed like never before. While artists, inventors, and thinkers were changing the world in their own way, brazen free-thinking social reformers were causing status-quo old timers bewilderment . (Rayburn, 5) The loosening of restrictions on women was one of the most significant legacies of the 1920s. In both America and certain countries in Europe, women were voting for the first time. The Gibson Girl look was now out, and in her place was a girl known as a flapper who smoke, drank, and had sex as she pleased. Working women were more pervasive, and after work they were smoking, drinking, and speaking freely shocking their Gibson-girl-era mothers. (Rayburn, 2) Though certainly not unknown before the 1920s, youthful rebellion struck at the very foundations of tradition and morality. Young women were wearing dresses and shockingly tight bathing suits that showed leg skin from the knee on down, an unprecedented flaunting of flesh. From 1920 to 1925, dress hemlines raced upward from the ankles to the knees heights that only a few years before were seen only in houses of prostitution. (Rayburn, 1) Girls were caking on makeup. Girls and young women caked makeup on themselves in a fashion previously seen only on women of ill repute. (Rayburn, 2) The 1920s was the decade in which dating as we know it today was invented. The unchaperoned date was something new, and the rebellious youth along with the flappers were sure to cause an uproar when put together. Some of these rebellious youth made habits that were thought to be perverted and immoral of this time period. These habits/hobbies included things such as necking and making out in the car, parked next to a lake or in a park. Because of all of the fornication that was taking place during this time period, many unwanted pregnancies came about at a very rapid pace. As Sanger herself put it, On Saturday nights I have seen groups of from fifty to one hundred women with their shawls over their heads waiting outside the office of a fivedollar abortionist. These were not merely unfortunate conditions among the poor such as we read about, I knew the women personally. They were living, breathing, human beings, with hopes, fears, and aspirations like my own, yet their wary misshapen bodies, always ailing, never failing, were destined to be thrown on the scrap heap before they were thirty-five. (Halsall, 2) The fact was that many women were getting pregnant with nowhere to turn but the abortionist, which was a risk in itself. Another major cause of death of pregnant women of this time was self-inflicted abortions. With the invention of the birth control pill, Margaret Sanger felt that these kind of unnecessary deaths could be easily prevented. Another factor leading up to the 1920 s was that men thought of women as more of an object than a person. They felt that it was the woman s place to take care of the house and tend to their husband s needs without asking questions. They also felt that women were there to please them, and therefore they thought of sex as a thing to be enjoyed by men, and as a necessary duty for a woman to perform for her husband. Only in recent years has woman s position as the gentler and weaker half of the human family been emphatically and generally questioned. Men assumed that this was a woman s place; woman herself accepted it. It seldom occurred to anyone to ask whether she would go on occupying it forever. (Sanger, 1) Through the leadership of Margaret Sanger, through the birth control movement, it lead the way for the formation of more women s rights and helped to give women an identity of their own. In the creative realm, the 1920 s were a convergence point in history, where many of the great artists and thinkers of the late 19th century were still alive and working, but passing the torch on to a generation that would lay the foundation of thought for the rest of the 20th century. (Rayburn, 3)

Although Margaret Sanger ended up being very successful, she did not acquire these accomplishments without a struggle. Margaret Sanger s largest opposition came from the Catholic church. (About Margaret Sanger, 1) The Catholic church viewed Margaret as an immoral woman and a sinner. The 1920 s was a time of definite change in the norms of society, yet the Catholic church was so caught up in their own ways that they would not acknowledge this change. Change plays a major role in society, as it always has, but the Catholics of this time seemed to view change as a form or a work of the devil. Wherever Sanger s battle would lead her, demonstrators would always be right there picketing and screaming at her telling her what a sinful and immoral woman she was. Although the Catholic Church played a major role in Sanger s struggle through the birth control movement, there were also many other factors that contributed to this struggle. Of these struggles, one of the most prominent would be that Margaret received resistance from the people of the 1920 s. The Victorian beliefs were still strong, and talk about sex, sexual anatomy, and or contraceptives was not appropriate. (About Margaret Sanger, 2) The overall society of this time period was still very modest and very reserved. If anyone was to mention such common subjects such as the puberty or reproduction, they would be considered to be of an obscene and lewd nature. Another major struggle that Margaret Sanger came upon frequently was that of the oppression of the government. In March of 1914, Sanger began to publish and edit the Woman Rebel, a militant journal. She urged the legalization of birth control to alleviate the sufferings of slum women, to free all women from tyranny of constant childbearing, and to further the class struggle. She also wrote a pamphlet, Family Limitation, in which she maintained that women are entitled to sexual fulfillment and challenged the laws against birth control, a term she had coined. The pamphlet contained the most complete information on contraceptive methods and techniques then available. Sanger had the pamphlets printed and stored secretly. In August 1914, Sanger was indicted by the Department of Justice for violation of the postal laws and faced a possible prison sentence of forty-five years. She fled to Canada and then sailed for England in October with a passport under an assumed name. After three days at sea, she cabled New York and had thousands of copies of Family Limitation distributed to union leaders around the country. In February of 1916, the government dropped it s charges against her. When her only daughter, five-year old Peggy, died suddenly in November, sympathetic publicity convinced the government to drop Sanger s prosecution. (Katz, 2) With both sons in boarding school, she toured the country for three months, speaking, making headlines, and incurring the opposition of the Catholic church. Margaret Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in 1916. After returning from a national tour in 1916, Sanger opened the nation s first birth control clinic in Brownsville, Brooklyn. (Katz, 2) A police vice-squad raid closed the clinic ten days later, and both sisters were arrested. While in jail, her sister refused to eat for 103 hours, almost causing her death. She was then force fed. In attendance of her trail were dozens of her clinic patients, along with wealthy women whose limousines crowded the streets. Sanger was sentenced to thirty days in jail. She appealed her conviction, calling the New York law unconstitutional because under it women were obliged to risk death in pregnancy against their will. The judge s decision, a breakthrough interpretation, did not overturn the conviction, but instead altered the statute s meaning by ruling that physicians could give birth control information to married women specifically for the cure and prevention of venereal disease. It was because of this decision that Sanger was able to open a legal birth control clinic in 1923. This loophole allowed Sanger the opportunity to open a legal, doctor-run birth control clinic in 1923. (Katz, 2) Sanger s imprisonment, her sister s ordeal, and the death of her daughter, combined with the socially acceptable supporters she had begun to attract, brought her national prominence and sympathy, and she received invitations to speak all over the United States. Her causes were, thus, firmly launched.

Margaret Sanger is known to have created more societal change during her lifetime than any other women since Isabelle of Spain. (Murphy, 1) Margaret Sanger published the Woman Rebel, a radical feminist monthly that advocated militant feminism, including the right to practice birth control. (Katz, 1) The publication of The Woman Rebel laid the foundation for the future work of the birth control movement and the personal crusade of Margaret Sanger. She continued to challenge the Comstock Laws by opening the nation’s first birth control clinic in Brownsville, Brooklyn in 1916, founding the Birth Control Review in 1917, and by organizing the first American birth control conference in New York in 1921. Sanger brought into existence the American Birth Control League that same year, and by 1923 opened the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau, the criterion for a national network of doctor staffed clinics that sprang up around the country in the 1920s and 1930s. Staffed by female doctors and social workers, the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau served as a model for the establishment of other clinics, and became a center for the collection of critical data on the effectiveness of contraceptives. (Katz, 2) In the 1930s, Sanger lobbied unsuccessfully for the repeal of the Comstock Laws. She did this through the National Committee for Federal Legislation on Birth Control, and won a judicial decision that absolved physicians from the Comstock Law restrictions on publication of contraceptive information. In 1929 Sanger formed the National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control to lobby for birth control legislation that granted physicians the right to legally disseminate contraceptives. (Katz, 3) Although Sanger was semi-retired in the 1940s, she continued her work with her birth control clinic and aided in the formation of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. After World War II, she returned to active work and was contributory in helping to found the International Planned Parenthood Federation. She served as its president from 1952-1959. She helped found the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) in 1952 and served as its first president until 1959. (Katz, 3) Just before Margaret died in 1966, the Supreme Court s ruling made birth control legal for married couples, a dream come true for Sanger. The 1965 Supreme Court decision, Grivswold vs. Connecticut made birth control legal for married couples. Only a few month s later, on September 6, 1966, Margaret Sanger, the founder of the birth control movement died in a nursing home a the age of 87. (Katz, 4)

Margaret Sanger was a very brave and independent woman. It was through her leadership that women have the right to express their sexuality more freely. Sanger felt that every person had a right to control his or her own life, and therefore found a way to make this more possible for women. The birth control movement itself, which can be accredited to Sanger, lead the way to the formation of many rights for women. Margaret encouraged many women to stand up for themselves and not to give up at any cost. Through her many trials and tribulations that came her way, she was able to overcome those obstacles and prove to the world that anything can be done with hard work and determination. Sanger was a very dedicated person to whom many women look up to for her audacity and courage in her time of trial. By her works and deeds, she was able to carry America through one of the most radical and transforming political movements of the century.