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Date _____ Class _____

6 *A Feeling for the Organism*

The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock

—*Evelyn Fox Keller*

Synopsis

A Feeling for the Organism is the biography of Barbara McClintock, a Nobel Prize-winning geneticist. She lived a secluded, independent, eccentric life, and because of her unique personality and style, she had a brilliant and productive career.

At a time when few women even went to college, McClintock received her Ph.D. in botany from Cornell University in 1927. Following her formal education, she became a research scientist, exploring genetics by working with maize.

Scientific research was making tremendous progress in the field of genetics and McClintock's research led her to the understanding of transposition of genetic elements. However, she was ahead of her time and her thorough presentation of the concept was not well received by the scientific community in the 1950s. Many of her colleagues found her ideas and explanations too elusive to grasp until more specific gene-programming work was done by other scientists in the area of molecular biology.

Throughout her career, she encountered opposition as a woman and as an individual thinker in science. Her scientific style, an extension of her personality, produced a body of research that reflected her "feeling for the organism." The Nobel Prize, research grants, and public recognition came late in her career. Despite the early lack of such tangible rewards, she never wavered from the absorption, or identification, that she felt for her genetic research material.

Student Focus

Reading this biography will help you understand Barbara McClintock as a person and as a scientist. The genetic findings of McClintock and her colleagues were far ahead of McClintock's time and beyond the understanding of her fellow scientists. How did this affect McClintock personally? How did McClintock's scientific style and methodology affect her work?

Correlation to Subject Matter

Genetics, Cytology, Molecular Biology, Embryology, and Evolution