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Harmon '23 Investigates Surprises in Classic Poetry

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Sometimes the best stories include a twist. Maria Harmon '23 spent her summer exploring the turns and surprises found in poetic works during her time as [one of six Illinois Wesleyan University 2022 Eckley Scholars](#).

Harmon, an English literature and marketing major, was given a stipend to pursue her project titled “Investigating Poetry’s ‘Well-Made’ Surprises.” She received guidance from Micheal Theune, Endowed Robert W. Harrington Professor of English.

“This topic is important to me because it is taking an analytical look at how poems work. Poetry is art and it’s beautiful, but it is also a highly structured thing as well, sometimes,” said Harmon. “This project is about reading some great poetry, but then taking a step back and looking for clues or fingerprints the author left behind that reveal a greater plan.”

Since her first year at IWU, Harmon has assisted Theune in seeking permissions to post poems to an upcoming website called High Voltage Poetry which will be an interactive tool for students to identify and learn about turns in poems. This process helped spark the idea for her Eckley project.

“All of the poems have significant turns in them. Understanding the turn in a poem is essential to understanding how its surprise works. As professor Theune’s main research involves the turn, an area of poetic study that has been under-examined, he is probably one of the most qualified people to guide me in this work,” said Harmon.

Over the course of the summer, Harmon examined “Element of Surprise: Our Mental Limits and the Satisfactions of Plot” by Vera Tobin, an associate professor of cognitive science at Case Western Reserve University. In the book, Tobin argues for a cognitive theory of how surprise is pulled off in fiction and film.

“I am applying her methodology to poetry,” said Harmon. “I am asking how surprise is made in poetry and could a cognitive approach be the answer. Are readers distracted from certain aspects of a poem in predictable ways and do those aspects that readers ignore come back at the end to create a feeling of surprise?”

Harmon said the project has made her more interested in how writers handle character development, including the skill of creating “a character whose perceptions and actions can change unexpectedly — thereby creating surprise — but who still come across as a cohesive entity.”

“Characters do not stay the same. They grow and change and sometimes we are surprised by their development, but their changing is what makes them dynamic and interesting,” she said.

Harmon said the Eckley Fellowship allowed her to gain some insight into a topic she plans to pursue in graduate school.

“Being able to devote an extended period of time to one topic and get paid while doing so feels like the best job opportunity ever. I’m getting paid to think and write about poetry,” she said.

[Established by the late IWU President Emeritus Robert Eckley and his wife Nell](#), the recognition provides a stipend of \$4,000 for each scholar to spend the summer conducting academic research or artistic activity under the mentorship of a faculty member. The program is designed to develop and deepen a student’s creative and research competencies.

Read about other 2022 Eckley Scholars:

- [Tyler Maple '22](#) — “The Effects of Reflexive Performance Reset on Performance of Elite High School Athletes: A Preliminary Study”



Maria Harmon '23