Write Now Exercise
Module about W.B. Yeats’s “Easter, 1916”

Portion of Roy Foster’s Academic Book Chapter,
“Shades and Angels 1916-1917”

Deliberately, not all these questions offer page numbers when quoting from Foster’s essay. However, if you quote from the essay, you MUST provide parenthetical page numbers. Here is an example of the right way to fulfil this obligation:

Foster asserts that an ideal of “‘romantic Ireland’ … had returned from the grave” (page 49).

In a piece of prose fiction, such as a novel or short story, the voice is “the narrator”; in a poem (such as “Easter, 1916”), it is “the speaker”; in an essay (such as “Shades and Angels 1916-1917”), it is the author identified via her or his family name (e.g., Foster).

QUESTION SET #1 (a through d) • Throughout this course, any question set not attempted receives a grade of zero. In addition, any response not presented as a complete sentence receives a grade of zero, even if the content it contains is accurate. Points are deducted for incorrect grammar and confusing expression. Carefully proof-read your work before submitting it.

The opening parts of the chapter, “Shades and Angels 1916-1917,” focus on how William Butler Yeats (WBY) composed his masterful poem, “Easter, 1916.” (1.a) According to the first paragraph, who was Yeats’s “old adversary”? That individual led the Irish Republican Brotherhood (or Fenians), a paramilitary organization, during the Easter Rising and, therefore, is remembered as the chief personage in the overall event.

In the second paragraph, Foster characterizes the Rising as a “démarche,” a word that means “political initiative.” He sees it as a physical-force effort to gain national independence for Ireland due to the fact that a constitutional effort, “Home Rule” (page 44), had not yet succeeded. Foster identifies the “pro-war stance” adopted by a leading Irish nationalist politician. (1.b) Who was that man? (Only his family name appears the text.) In this instance, “pro-war” does not refer to support for the Rising; instead, it indicates an endorsement of young Irishmen’s participation in World War I (the Great War; 1914-1918), mainly in Irish units of the British army, such as the 16th Irish Division.

In the third paragraph discusses the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, which Yeats and his great sponsor and mentor-collaborator, Lady Augusta Gregory (“Gregory”), had founded, with some others, in 1904. The Abbey aimed to be Ireland’s national theatre. (1.c) In communicating with Yeats about “rumbles” (page 45) of nationalist discontent in Ireland, Gregory believed that which organization, led by Arthur Griffith, was chiefly responsible?

(1.d) Who was “the Volunteer leader … kept in ignorance” about plans for the Easter Rising? The Irish Volunteers, a nationalist militia, had split in 1914, with a majority supporting and a minority opposing the idea that those seeking Irish freedom (i.e. political independence for Ireland outside the United Kingdom) should put aside their nationalist aspirations and, in fact, help the UK in the Great War against Germany. By “Volunteer” in the fourth paragraph, Foster means the minority (anti-Great War) coterie. For various reasons, including poor internal communications, that coterie participated in the Rising in only a partial fashion.
**QUESTION SET #2** (a through d) • When the Easter Rising started — on April 24, 1916 (Easter Monday) — W.B. Yeats was not in Ireland. Instead, he was in the heart of the English countryside, staying in an “idyllic farmhouse” (page 45) in the Cotswolds, a range of hills in the county known as Gloucestershire.

**2.a) Who owned the house?** That individual was a painter, and he was producing a portrait of Yeats.

Yeats had two sisters: Elizabeth (known as Lolly) and Susan (known as Lily). In 1908, the sisters had founded Cuala (pronounced cool-a) Industries, a feminist, all-women business in Dublin, dedicated to Arts and Crafts hand-manufacturing, with Lolly operating a printing-press and Lily specializing in embroidery.

**2.b) In a letter to “Quinn,” how did Lily describe the Easter Rising?** (John Quinn was an Irish-American lawyer who help fund the careers of Irish artists, including W.B. Yeats.)

Initially, Lady Gregory blamed the Rising on Sinn Féin (“Ourselves”), an Irish-nationalist political party that Arthur Griffith founded in 1905, based on ideas that he had advanced in the newspaper he edited, United Irishman. In fact, the British media and others often called the event the Sinn Féin Rising, even though Sinn Féin took no direct part in it. Lady Gregory and Yeats personally knew several of the rebels. In “Easter, 1916,” the speaker refers to one of them, Patrick Pearse, as a “man [who] had kept a school” (line 24). Foster identifies the school, remarking that Yeats had “allowed [it] to act his plays for nothing.”

**2.c) What was the name of the school, and who was the “university lecturer” who “had dedicated a book of poems” to Yeats?** That individual was associated with Pearse’s school and, thus, receives mention in “Easter, 1916” as Pearse’s “helper and friend” (line 26).

**2.d) Of whose “incarnation as the most strident of republican socialists” did Yeats disapprove?** She is the woman, a leading rebel, who, according to the speaker in “Easter, 1916,” devoted “[h]er nights” to political “argument” (line 19). As she had married a self-proclaimed Polish nobleman, she used the title “Countess.”

**QUESTION SET #3** (a through e) • Corresponding with John Quinn, the American-born poet “Pound” (i.e. Ezra Pound) reported Yeats’s opinion that Pearse would “be happy” only if one outcome transpired.

**3.a) What was that outcome, and what “mania” (per Yeats) did Pearse possess?** You may be familiar with the name, for it is associated with a public park on Bay Street in Savannah, which honors an early-nineteenth-century Irish republican martyr.

Yeats maintained an apartment in a complex called Woburn Buildings in central London, the capital city of England (and the United Kingdom), and he generally split his time between that residence and Ireland. Having completed his portrait-sitting at the farmhouse in the Cotswolds, Yeats traveled to his London apartment, where he wrote to his sister, Lolly (Elizabeth), who was in her home the Dublin suburb of Dundrum (having missed the Rising due to an Easter mini-vacation in England).

**3.b) According to Yeats’s letter to Lolly, what circumstance would have to have happened (as a result of the Rising) in order for him to “go over” to Dublin from London?**

**3.c) In that same piece, what four-word condition (beginning with “V”) does Yeats identify as having “made [Pearse] dangerous,” and what, in your opinion, does Yeats mean when he invokes that condition?**

After the Rising, Yeats continued to remain in England, visiting such friends as Charles Ricketts, a London-based artist who, in 1912, had worked for the Abbey Theatre, Dublin. Foster indicates that while in London, Yeats’ “changing sense of what the rebellion [i.e. the Easter Rising] represented” derived mainly from letters written by one of his friends in Ireland, the occupant of a Big House (or country mansion) called Coole, near the rural village of Gort in County Galway.

**3.d) Who was that friend, and what did she
deem “terrible to think of” as she contemplated how conditions in Ireland would likely change in the aftermath of the Easter Rising? (3.e) In a May 7, 1916, letter, what adjective did she use to characterize Pearse and MacDonagh? The British authorities had court martialed Pearse, MacDonagh, and a third rebel, Thomas Clarke, on May 2; and their executions, by firing squad, occurred the next day. Pearse was 36; MacDonagh 38; and Clarke 58. Soon after the three died, the British Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, warned the British Army commander on the ground, John Maxwell, that “anything like a large number of executions would ... sow the seeds of lasting trouble in Ireland.”

QUESTION SET #4 (a through f) • In further contemplating the Rising, Lady Gregory consulted an English Romantic poet who had noted that “a person who … would abolish the government of the day” can, having died for the cause, end up being remembered not as a “traitor” but, rather, as “a triumphant exhibition of suffering virtue.” (4.a) Who was the poet? His words appeared in “On the Punishment of Death,” an essay he wrote in 1815.

Lady Gregory expressed anxiety that soon after the Rising, the Abbey Theatre (managed by St. John Ervine) intended to stage a play that Sinn Féin and many other Irish nationalists “had attacked … nine years before.” (4.b) What was the play’s title? When answering the next question, consult a reliable source (not Wikipedia) and cite it in your response. (No citation = no points.) (4.c) Who wrote the play, and why was it controversial when first presented at the Abbey Theatre in January 1906?

Before establishing the Abbey Theatre (in 1904), Lady Gregory and Yeats (both Protestants) had cooperated with the Irish playwright Edward Martyn (a Catholic) on a venture called the Irish Literary Theatre (1899-1901). (4.d) How did Martyn characterize the rebels “executed” as a result of the Easter Rising, who (according to Foster) the Irish public was seeing “more and more clearly … as martyrs”? Yeats’s sister, Lily (Susan), also expressed opinions about the rebels, from among whose number 16 (all men) suffered execution, the last being Sir Roger Casement, a world-famous human-rights advocate, on August 3, 1916. (4.e) By “mid May” of 1916, what was Lily Yeats’s view of the relationship between the Irish and the “colonist” British?

(4.f) By “the end of June” of 1916, who “judged” Ireland to be, as a result of the Rising, “a political corpse,” but one capable of regeneration? The individual used two capital letters for his name, although he was born George William Russell. He engaged in multiple activities, as varied as mysticism (Yeats called him the “hairy fairy”) and the agricultural cooperative movement, which transformed the Irish farm sector.

QUESTION SET #5 (a through d) • Central to Foster’s study is Yeats’s relationship with Maud Gonne (1866-1953), the English-born daughter of a British Army captain, who, in 1882, received a posting in Dublin. Gonne would become an ardent feminist and Irish nationalist, as well as Yeats’s muse. He proposed marriage to her on four occasions before she married, in 1903, John MacBride (nicknamed “Foxy Jack”), an Irish physical-force nationalist who had led a volunteer militia, the Irish Transvaal Brigade, in South Africa against the British Army during the Second Boer War (1899-1902), a conflict that many historians associate with concentration camps and machine guns.

Maud Gonne brought into her marriage to MacBride an 11-year-old daughter, Iseult; and she and MacBride would have a son, Seán (who went on to win the 1974 Nobel Peace Prize). In short order, the Gonne-MacBride marriage failed, with Gonne unsuccessfully suing for divorce in 1905. In different venues, she accused McBride, an alcoholic, of committing domestic violence, as well as sexually molesting Iseult. MacBride became a rebel fighter in the Easter Rising by volunteering, in Dublin, on the first day of combat:
April 24, 1916 (Easter Monday). After his capture and trial for treason, the British executed him on May 5, 1916; he was 47. He appears in “Easter, 1916” as the “drunken, vainglorious lout” (line 32) who had “done most bitter wrong / To some who are near my [the speaker’s] heart” (lines 33-34). After the Rising, in 1917, Yeats again proposed marriage to Maud Gonne. Once she rejected him, he quickly made the same offer to Isult, then 23, who also demurred.

Foster quotes from a May 11, 1916, letter that Yeats (in London, England) wrote to Gregory (in County Galway, Ireland). With his typical disregard for regular punctuation, Yeats told Gregory, “I do not yet know what [Maud Gonne] feels about her [estranged] husbands death” (page 51). (5.a) According to the letter, what does Gonne’s “main thought” about the effects of the Easter Rising “[seem] to be”? The letter invokes Home Rule, which was a peaceful campaign by constitutional Irish nationalists to restore to Ireland the Dublin-based parliament and the elements of self-government lost when — on January 1, 1801 — Ireland found itself obliged to enter a new political entity, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (or UK), governed from London. Before World War I began (in August 1914), Ireland seemed to be on track to getting Home Rule, but the British put the measure aside due to the global conflict.

Foster explains that on May 23, 1916, Yeats mailed to John Quinn, in New York, “a typescript of Reveries” (page 51) — in other words, a draft of a volume of his (Yeats’s) autobiography. (5.b) What “desire” did Yeats “[confess]” in the letter that accompanied the typescript?

(5.e) What was Yeats’s connection to — or involvement with the case of — the Easter Rising rebel remembered by his hangman as “the bravest man it fell to my unhappy lot to execute”? He was the sixteenth and final rebel to be executed. (5.d) Who wrote (and would share with Yeats) the lyrics that, according to Foster, ultimately appeared “as Poems of the Irish Rebellion, 1916”? That volume debuted in 1922, four years after its author’s death; however, the poem that Foster mentions, “Sixteen Dead Men,” had already appeared in print — specifically in Love of Ireland: Poems and Ballads (1916). Its final stanza includes the lines, “Sixteen dead men! Shall they return? / ‘Yea, they shall come again, breath of our breath.’”

QUESTION SET #6 (a through d) • By late May 1916, Yeats was contemplating production of what he called “a group of poems on the Dublin rising” (page 53), although he had not yet visited post-insurrection Dublin! (6.a) What crisis at the Abbey Theatre caused Gregory to “[summon]” Yeats “firmly” to return to the Irish capital? (When answering this question, do not quote directly from Foster’s account; instead, use your own words.) Yeats arrived in Dublin “during the first week of June [1916].” As well as “survey[ing] the wreckage of much of the city center,” he took a trip to Greystones, a coastal town south of the metropolis, where his brother, the renowned painter Jack Butler Yeats, was “recovering from [a] nervous breakdown” (page 54).

Before and during 1898, W.B. Yeats had played a significant role in “the ’98 centennial” — that is, events to mark the one-hundredth anniversary of the anti-British United Irish Rebellion of 1798, the bloodiest year in Irish history. To a degree, the spirit of the centennial informed his thoughts and emotions as he examined ruined buildings in Dublin, not least the General Post Office on Sackville (also called O’Connell) Street, which Pearse had designated rebel headquarters just a few weeks earlier. Also weighing on Yeats was the private matter of whether to “propose marriage once more” (page 54) to Maud Gonne, technically a widow since the execution of her long-estranged husband, John MacBride. Yeats sought advice from a female spiritualist medium, “sending urgent letters” to her that resulted in “sessions” or séances, on May 14 and 17, 1916, about the advisability of making a marriage proposal. (6.b) What was that woman’s name?
On June 22, 1916, Yeats met Maud Gonne’s young-adult daughter, Iseult, in London; and the pair traveled together to a house called Les Mouettes (“the seagulls”) in a seaside community, Colleville-sur-Mer, in Normandy, an Atlantic peninsula in northwestern France. (Incidentally, the beach at Colleville-sur-Mer would become a major D-Day landing site, designated Omaha Beach, during the Second World War; as a result, an American Cemetery, containing 9,833 burials, is located there.) (6.c) According to a letter Yeats wrote to his “old friend” Florence Farr, what did Maud Gonne say to “her little boy,” Seán MacBride, upon learning that the British had executed John MacBride for his part in the Easter Rising?

Foster devotes most of pages 55 through 57 to the complex friendship between Yeats (born in 1865) and Iseult Gonne (born in 1894). (6.d) In the “long letter” (page 56) that he sent Gregory from Colleville-sur-Mer, how did Yeats characterize or analyze his feelings towards Iseult—and how, in replying to the letter with one of her own, did Gregory respond?

QUESTION SET #7 (a and b) • On page 57, Foster presents an extended passage from another Yeats letter to Gregory, dated (according to the chapter’s endnotes) August 14, 1916. In it, he insisted that the 21-year-old Iseult Gonne was “really a child” who smoked too much and might be “going into melancholia”—that is, depression. For your information: During the summer of 1916, Yeats turned 51. In October, 1917, he married (for the first and only time). His bride, Bertha (known as “Georgie” or “George”) Hyde-Lees, was a 25-year-old Englishwoman.

Yeats complied with Gregory’s request, travelling from France to London, where he stayed for several days, before heading to Dublin. (7.b) Who was the author—and what was the title—of the play whose debut performance at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, Yeats and Gregory attended on September 15, 1916? Yeats had commissioned the play for the 1904 launch of the Abbey; however, he rejected it because (according to its author) it did not idealize “a new Ireland” but instead “[was] a very uncompromising presentment [i.e. presentation] of the real old Ireland.”

QUESTION SET #8 (a through d) • On September 16, 1916, Yeats and Gregory left Dublin and travelled the 130 miles to Coole, the 64-year-old Gregory’s country mansion in County Galway. (8.a) On what date in September 1916 did Yeats, residing at Coole, “[finish] his poem on the Rising”—i.e. the lyric titled “Easter, 1916”—that he had begun writing while with Maud and Iseult Gonne in Colleville-sur-Mer (also known simply as Colleville)? When discussing “Easter, 1916,” Foster refers to two of Yeats’s earlier political poems, one of them being “To a Wealthy Man.” (8.b) What is the title of the other poem, and what do the last two lines of its opening stanza (verse) say? To discover that content, use and cite a reliable source, such as the website, Poetry Foundation.  

When Yeats completed “Easter, 1916,” he “circulated [it] in samizdat form the following spring” (i.e. during the spring of 1917). (8.c) What does the word “samizdat” mean? Note: In order to gain full points,
you must use and cite a reliable source, such as the Oxford English Dictionary, available via our university library’s website. Ensure that your explanation fits with how Foster uses the word.

Initially, Foster quotes from the version of “Easter, 1916” that Yeats circulated during spring 1917, so some of the words and punctuation differ from the final, definitive version (which we are studying). The poem’s first stanza contains the phrase “where motley is worn” (line 14). (8.d) What does the word “motley” mean? Note: In order to gain full points, you must use and cite a reliable source, such as the Oxford English Dictionary. Ensure that your explanation fits with how the poem’s speaker uses the word.

The definite version of “Easter, 1916” did not appear until the fall of 1920: in the British magazine The New Statesman and the American magazine The Dial, as well as in a collection of Yeats poems published as a book titled Michael Robartes and the Dancer.

QUESTION SET #9 (a through e) • On page 61, Foster analyzes the third stanza of “Easter, 1916,” which he deems a “meditation.” According to Foster, Yeats had, in the past, used the term “flowing & living world” to encourage Irish people not to be rigid in their mindset. However, in this third stanza, Yeats’s speaker in effect acknowledges that a rigid, uncompromising fixation on revolutionary action in support of Irish independence — “[h]earts with one purpose alone” (line 41) — had, in fact, achieved something during Easter Week of 1916. Foster traces Yeats’s awareness of the rigid mindset to an essay that the poet had composed “six years before” (i.e. in 1910), while at Colleville-sur-Mer. In the piece, Yeats invoked Irish people with minds excited and convinced by “some fixed idea,” people “whose patriotism is perhaps great enough to carry them to the scaffold.” (9.a) What was the title of the essay?

On page 62, Foster quotes Maud Gonne’s recollection of a discussion that she and Yeats had had on the beach at Colleville-sur-Mer. (She gave “September 1916” as the date of the encounter, even though Yeats left in late August.) She uses the term “the stone” to characterize her “fixed idea” about Ireland. However, she elaborates on the nature of stone. (9.b) What “inner” quality or characteristic does the stone possess?

(9.c) According to Foster what “question” does the “last stanza” of the four-stanza poem “Easter, 1916” “[take] up” (page 62)? (9.d) In the first sentence of her (November 1916) “My dear Willie” letter to Yeats about the poem, what view does Maud Gonne express, and what, later in the letter, does she identify as the phrase that provided the poem’s “original inspiration”? In the letter, Gonne rejects the notion that key leaders of the Easter Rising — Pearse, MacDonagh, and the trade-union (and Irish Citizen Army) leader James Connolly — had “fixed minds.” (9.e) In her opinion, what was the nature of their efforts to “[serve] Ireland” during their respective lives?

QUESTION SET #10 (a and b) • In March 1917, Yeats “sent a copy” (page 64) of “Easter, 1916” to Clement Shorter (husband of the answer to Question 5.d above). A significant literary and journalistic figure, Shorter agreed to Yeats’s request to publish just 25 copies of “Easter, 1916” and be “very careful” about restricting access to them. While several reasons made Yeats cautious about angering the British government at that time (as public circulation of “Easter, 1916” would almost certainly have done), one concern dominated: “our [his and Gregory’s] dispute with the authorities about the Lane pictures.”

Sir Hugh Lane was Gregory’s nephew (her sister’s son), who had been killed when a German submarine torpedoed and sank the passenger liner Lusitania in May 1915, early in World War I. Essentially, Yeats and Gregory asserted that the City of Dublin’s proposed Municipal Gallery had a moral right to Lane’s extraordinary collection of paintings, even though the National Gallery in London could push a legal claim.
(10.a) **How many paintings constituted the Lane collection?** Use and *cite* a reliable source, such as the National Gallery (London) website, when answering this question. (The correct response will include one of the following numbers: 27, 39, or 51. Remember: Any written homework response not presented as a complete sentence receives a grade of zero.)

Yeats and Gregory worked hard to secure “the pictures’ return” to Dublin; indeed, on January 19, 1917, Yeats told a friend, Ellen Duncan, “I am doing nothing but this dispute” (page 65). Originally, Yeats had intended to publish “Easter, 1916” publicly in the collection of his poems that his sisters’ Cuala Industries released in 1917 (and that his major publisher, Macmillan, released in 1919). *(10.b) What was that collection’s title?* (You can stop reading Foster’s essay just before the Roman numeral III on page 66.)