"To promote literature in this rising empire and to encourage the arts, have ever been amongst the warmest wishes of my heart." (George Washington, 1798, first president of the United States and first major benefactor of Washington and Lee University) Describe a work of art that has influenced you, and discuss the impact it has had on you. (800 words)

The most powerful pieces of art tell stories about their societies or about their makers. The richest works become even more meaningful when we know why they were made, and the double weight of that context and its expression in art should deliver a shock of emotion likewise doubly charged. Though inspirational art can fill the viewer with hope and awe, the most impactful to my mind is always that bittersweet work which describes the pain of worldly life while imbuing the image of that pain with great beauty. This duality of spirit is what has influenced me the most about one of Vincent van Gogh's final works, *Wheatfield with Crows*.

Wheatfield does not number, in my eyes, among van Gogh's most visually stunning paintings. *Road with Cypress and Star* and *The Starry Night* overcome it with the graceful strokes and imminent motion that made his style unique. Despite their cold palettes, however, they are both optimistic pieces, extolling life as it was for the travelers on their nighttime journey and the townsfolk of warm Saint-Rémy resting beneath the frigidly magnificent sky. They are gentle in their execution and almost kindly in their view of the world. *Wheatfield* is not so. It is garish in its short, callous strokes. The sky is dark, not with the grip of nature's frost as in the other two, but with the portension of sorrow, dangling itself willfully over the fields that so often had proven to be van Gogh's respite from sickness and tragedy. That cruel irony can only be noted alongside the artist's life. Through years of grappling with mental illnesses, his art was, seemingly, a release to a tortured mind. Even when caught in the worst halting spasms of the soul, he still could find some relief in his work. There are other dark pieces to be sure, but most are overwhelmingly bright when compared to the trials he faced while creating them. *The Starry Night* is a perfect example of this contradiction, as he completed it only a month after entering the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum in Saint-Rémy. But in *Wheatfield*, Chaos makes his

masterpiece; the shadows of the end are ushered in by a murder of crows. Tired of living as a patient in pain, van Gogh took his own life shortly after its completion. The darkness creeping through the fields becomes the scythe of the Reaper, harvesting its due.

Thus the anguish that bubbles up from the voids between the strokes, so much wider here than in most other works, is that of the artist himself. Imagine his loneliness, facing the desolate enormity of a fundamentally uncaring world, as expansive and bleak in his mind as the storm clouds over the windswept grain. Some, like the crows, could survive such a world, but the artist himself could not bear it. Reality can be a fearsome and unforgiving place; perhaps the sometimes unfaithful reflections of it that he created helped to make it more bearable. Yet the end still comes for us all, and I think he bore that thought heavily in mind when he painted this piece. That lesson is a good one for all of us.

Art is at its core an expression of our collective experience, and thus it serves as a repository of our cultural memory. What makes a work of art truly meaningful is when it makes us ponder life, or, as in this case, death as the artist did. The artist's ability to share a tiny shard of existence with his audience is unique. All the thought I've had about life from *Wheatfield with Crows* and other works like it has made a great impact on my view of the world. Recalling death and pain isn't pleasant, but it's the only way to understand either when they bear down on us, brooding like the crows over the field. Ignorance and confusion only make our ends more halting and fearful. To value life, we have to respect its transience. That's how van Gogh has influenced me.