

# **The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade Study Guide**

**The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade  
by Thomas Lynch**

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# Plot Summary

Thomas Lynch is a famous American poet and essay writer, and yet he has the unusual additional role as an undertaker. As such, *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade* is a unique book, full of profound insights and lyrical prose built around Lynch's work as the owner and operator of a funeral home in his hometown of Milford, Michigan. Initially one might think that 'The Undertaking' is about the 'dismal trade' of undertaking, but the subtitle 'life studies from the dismal trade' is closer to the point. The book does not have a single theme or point but instead is a series of life lessons built around death, dying and community.

Even the title of the book suggests the underlying ambiguity in the book's subject matter, as 'undertaking' is both a verb describing the activity of an undertaker and a noun, referring to a journey or task taken up. And the ambiguity is reflected in the book's twelve chapters. Chapter 1, *The Undertaking*, introduces the reader to Thomas Lynch, his family, his occupation, his childhood and various deaths in his area. The major aim of the chapter is to argue that death is important to the living but not to the dead. Lynch emphasizes the deeply social and communal features of death as among the most salient and meaningful aspects of the end of human life.

Chapter 2, *Gladstone*, covers the life and death of Thomas Lynch's father, his passion for undertaking and Thomas's experience taking up his father's path. In it, Lynch expresses regret that a healthier and more commercial world forgets the deep tie between life and death that his father understood so well. Chapter 3, *Crapper*, discusses the avoidance of death and its importance in the lives of many people.

Chapter 4, *The Right Hand of the Father*, is a meditation on the duality represented to him by his mother's faith and his father's fear surrounding death and how he is the child of both inclinations, wobbling back and forth between belief and unbelief in God. Chapter 5, *Words Made Flesh*, continues to elaborate on this theme, building in particular on the idea of God and the relationship between love and death. Chapter 6, *The Golfatorium*, is ostensibly the story of Thomas Lynch's idea of combining a golf course and a cemetery, but it reads on a deeper level as a reflection on the often unrecognized simultaneity of the lightness of life and the gravity of death.

Chapter 7, *Mary and Wilbur*, discusses the idea of revering death and dying and seeing the deep ritual in it, representing by Mary Johnson's attempt to have the Oak Grove bridge rebuilt so that her funeral procession would not have to pass through the commercial part of Milford. Chapter 8, *Sweeney*, discusses the life of Lynch's friend and fellow poet, Matthew Sweeney, his hypochondria and constant obsession with death and dying. Chapter 9, *All Hallows's Eve*, is a record of Thomas Lynch's attempt to figure out when he was going to die, which he decided was discovered through pinpointing a precise moment of 'mid-life' when one is as far from birth as one is from death, again tying life and death together as a continuous feature of human existence.



Chapter 10, Uncle Eddie, Inc. is a criticism of assisted suicide on the grounds that it along with other cultural ideas trivializes death and thus takes away something deep from humanity. Chapter 11, Jessica, the Hound and the Casket Trade discusses the symbolism of coffins and caskets and how they are integrated into the social life of the community. Finally, Chapter 12, Tract, contains Lynch's instructions for how to run his own funeral with the caveat that his funeral is really the possession of those who knew and loved him.



# Chapter 1, The Undertaking

## Chapter 1, The Undertaking Summary and Analysis

Thomas Lynch buries a few hundred of the people in his town each year. He cremates two or three dozen. He sells caskets, burial vaults, urns, headstones, monuments and flowers. He mostly sells the use of his business and owns a hearse, a minivan and several other transportation methods. He once sold his services according to a 'unit pricing method', a packaged deal with one number, a large one. Today he itemized because it is the law. He makes a million a year, five percent of which is profit. He is the only undertaker in town.

Thomas predicts the market based on a crude death rate, the number of deaths each year out of a thousand persons. 8.4 people will die each year out of 1,000. Two-thirds of those people die from old age, 5% are children. 2.5 corpses are baby-boomers (this is the mid-nineties) and they are mostly Realtors and attorneys. However, eventually everyone will die.

People die all the time, every season and every day. The deaths are largely randomly distributed. Any cause of death will do.

Some try to pretend that they don't care about what happens to their body when they die, but that isn't true. Most say they don't want pomp and circumstance, just simplicity. Thomas thinks this is feigned humility - it is costless, after all. Why not simply be humble in life? When you're dead, you're dead; nothing can be done to you, for you, with you or about you.

Everyone is afraid of death and this is healthy, as it keeps us alive. He finds that people assume he must be fascinated with death to do the job he does. No, it's just a job for him. He, like the dead, doesn't care. But the dead do matter, because they mattered to the living.

Hospitals always make death sound like a disorder, dying of failures, anomalies, arrests, etc. But death is universal. Thomas then describes picking up Milo Hornsby, who had died in the hospital. He has to quickly take Milo's body and first 'set the features', making people's faces look like they did in life. Thomas notes that when his wife left him and their children, Milo had sent his laundry van to his house and had the laundry done for him. Embalming follows setting the features, and it takes about two hours.

Thomas thinks that it is universal among humans to wish for something to happen to the dead just after they die, such as coming back to life. But when people are dead, again, they are dead. We can't be gotten in or kept out of heaven. When the person dies, the person dies and the body is all that is left.



# Chapter 2, Gladstone

## Chapter 2, Gladstone Summary and Analysis

Thomas is at the Midwinter Conference, a conference of undertakers when funeral directors in Michigan find a warm place in the Lesser Antilles to meet and hear talks. However, Thomas is on a neighboring island and notes that he has been undertaker in his town for twenty-five years. He doesn't much care to talk business with the other directors, preferring to think about his future. Thomas's father was a funeral director, as are three of Thomas's brothers. Two of his sisters help out. He remembers his father and mother going to the Midwinter Conferences, that they would come back excited about their craft.

Thomas's father was fond of quoting William Gladstone, the nineteenth century Victorian liberal British Prime Minister, about how a people's respect for the law could be measured by its respect for the dead. Thomas thinks that Gladstone and his father were right.

Thomas's father died three years before on an island near Florida's Gulf Coast. He had retired three years earlier, when his wife died. He had heart disease but was going out with women, despite having a heart attack every six months. The fourth one killed him.

Thomas got the call from his father's girlfriend. He and his brother picked up the body; they knew the drill. They had promised him a special arrangement that he had requested from them. Some believe that bodies are 'just a shell' and should be related to as such. Young clergy, family friends, and those unsettled by grief make this claim. It is supposed to comfort what cannot be comforted. But the living have the right of declaring the dead dead, according to ritual. And these rituals are very important, as they are about the meaning of life. Death is serious and the body is not just a shell. Dead bodies aren't the person but they aren't wholly distinct either; they are 'changelings'.

Thomas had seen his father lying horizontally before in the hospital. But seeing him dead was different. His body was cooperative and embalming was easy; Thomas wondered whether this is what he'd look like dead.

At a Midwinter Conference years before, Thomas's father told him why he was a funeral director. Funeral directing was about connecting the dead to the living that cared for them, as important to human social life as weddings or births. The story then returns to Thomas and his brother, who brought their father home.

Thomas's father told him the reason that some have open casket funerals is to encounter the reality of death. He had said this in 1963, when Kennedy died. The reality of Kennedy's death had impacted everyone.

As Thomas watches his generation try to install 'family values' in their children, he thinks Gladstone and his father were right. The meaning of life was connected to the meaning of death. This meaning is not about choice, function, or psychological correctness. It is age-old and the funeral cannot be reinvented (no matter what the men at the Midwinter Conference think).



## Chapter 3, Crapper

### Chapter 3, Crapper Summary and Analysis

Thomas opens the chapter with his friend Don Paterson and him thinking about Thomas Crapper, the inventor of the flush toilet, Thomas Crapper. Don and Thomas Lynch had just returned from a poetry festival, where Don had panned Thomas's poems. But they still had a good conversation together.

Thomas first went to Ireland twenty-seven years before. He was curious about his family and Yeats's poetry. He had saved up money for the flight when his friends went to Vietnam. He met up with some cousins there, Tommy and Nora Lynch, brother and sister. They had a good life together, running a farm. He had a good time during his visit with them.

Years later, he tries to reproduce the fun time he had there, while living in a large, old home in a small Michigan town, Galway, next to his funeral home. That is what he is doing the night with Don. He mentions that he owns Tommy and Nora's house. Tommy had died only five or so years after Thomas left Ireland and Nora lived for another twenty-one years. When she died, she left the house to him. He had added some new things to the house after she died, including a new toilet.

New toilets quickly remove evidence and they civilize one in a way religion and law cannot. Crapper's invention was truly marvelous, but it has made us unable to handle the filthiness it removes when it arises. Death is the same way. As we hide it, we come to understand it less well. He notes that the house he now lives in, in Liberty, was built in 1880, in a time where a large, extended family would share the house. It would have births and the elderly in the same place. Many big events took place there, and now as houses have shrunk, many events were moved out, such as births moving to hospitals. Dying in one's own bed become much less common.

Thomas's business had arisen through this process. Once making water and bowel movements were placed in the house, birth, marriage, disease and dying were moved out. This is why the funerals held in his funeral parlor were so important. They once took place in the house, but now the meaning had been moved out of the home, just as the Crapper had been moved in the home.

Thomas then tells the story of going to stay with Nora Lynch, his cousin, when she got sick. He traveled to the hospital in Ennis; Nora was happy to see him. Nora died before Easter. Her corpse was 'quiet' and 'continent'. She didn't stir. They had a three day wake and buried her on Monday in the same vaulted grave as her father, father's father and many others. She had enough money, as she had saved. The family reminisced. But Thomas still regrets the fact that deaths aren't had at home and that the toilet isn't still outside.





# Chapter 4, The Right Hand of the Father

## Chapter 4, The Right Hand of the Father Summary and Analysis

Thomas had an uneventful childhood. He was well protected by his parents from important perils, especially undertaking. Lynch's mother and father knew that random and unreasonable damage could happen. Thomas's mother let God take care of the big things. Yet Thomas's father thought that God obeyed the Laws of Nature practically all the time, no matter how brutal. Sometimes the two would come into conflict over a risky activity, Thomas's mother usually being the more permissive. Thomas's father was usually thankful, as he was afraid of losing perspective due to his intimate acquaintance with death.

Thomas thinks his father's fear was well-founded and he was always vigilant. Each morning brought news of catastrophe from the radio, but Thomas's mother always encouraged him to let go and let God. Her belief in God included the belief that God would hold her accountable for her children's souls, so she always sought to protect them from danger. Despite this, sometimes near misses occurred, and Thomas gives some examples, including a nasty drunken fall off a third-story fire escape of his that landed him in the hospital. Thomas's father was furious and her mother thanked God he hadn't died. Not that they're dead, Thomas imagines that his father still fears and his mother still hopes.

In 1974, Thomas's first child was born, and he found himself parenting as he was parented. They soon after purchased their own funeral home. Thomas noticed many stillbirths and fetal deaths, which constantly worried him. He would even meet with parents who had undergone such a tragedy, which made things worse. When the old are buried, the past is buried, but burying infants is burying the future. When Thomas's kids started growing up, he started to attending to the dead bodies of kids their age that came through the funeral home. Thomas then recounts various cases.

Thomas had learned his father's fear, seeing lethal outcomes everywhere. He watched his children fiercely, even during the day. And his fear would often generate anger when his children wouldn't take care of themselves, say running through the streets. For Thomas, faith is the only cure of fear; it is letting go and letting God. But faith is hard and there are days when you feel alone; Thomas then discusses one such day when he buried Stephanie, a girl who had been struck and killed by a cemetery marker, ironically enough.

Sometimes in Thomas's life, outcomes seem like multiple choice questions. It might have been God, it might not have been, the devil might have done it, it may have been random, or it's just a mystery. All these options occur to him at times and yet each answer leaves his inheritance the same - the fear of his father and the faith of his mother.



# Chapter 5, Words Made Flesh

## Chapter 5, Words Made Flesh Summary and Analysis

Thomas claims that sometimes in life events occur in ways that make us think of God. If Chance brought them about, it would be frightening. Two years ago, Thomas's friend and mentor, the poet Henry Nugent, became depressed over the break-up of his second marriage. His first marriage had ended when he was still a young man. His wife was beautiful, talented and ambitious. The two married and had children. His wife had left with the children because she needed a break and came back with divorce papers.

Love and death are two of life's great themes, but the death of love is both strange and predictable. Nugent responded by becoming so depressed that he wanted to die. His fourth collection, *Good Counsel*, was published during this time. But he couldn't have cared less. He spent all the profits on a lawyer.

But sad men, in the scale of things, are unimportant in comparison with larger sorrows. Heartbreak, further, is often invisible and cannot qualify for the standard sources of relief. Divorced men are simply damaged or deadbeat. But Nugent was not alone.

Both Nugents called him weekly and daily. They had listened when his ruined marriage fell apart, so he returned the favor. Thomas could not convince the wife to reconcile and the divorce was eventually settled. Thomas's other friend, Robin Robertson, was preparing copy for *The New Yorker*. It is a great place for poets to publish in. His poem, "Artichoke" got in.

Copyright prevents Thomas from printing the full text of the poem, so he describes some of its detail. He is impressed by "Artichoke," though.

Henry Nugent decided to travel to cure his heart. He couldn't stand to see his family because of the pain. Nugent therefore took a sabbatical, using Thomas's house in Ireland. He had gone woman-hunting, and had plenty of sex. But after a year, he grew tired of it and went searching for love. Nugent returned to the United States and went on a road trip. He would send Thomas postcards. In August, he had found his woman. In September they married. It was "Artichoke" that had united them.

On some days, Thomas is sure there's a God but not on other days. He often takes Pascal's Wager, however. All endings aren't happy if God exists but not every end is a permanent end. Some are redeemed.

Nugent had found joy again, returning to life, and he began to write poems again. One of them makes it into *The New Yorker*. And Thomas is able to reprint it without copyright interfering.



# Chapter 6, The Golfatorium

## Chapter 6, The Golfatorium Summary and Analysis

Thomas Lynch is taking his first transcontinental flight and counting his blessings. But his mother was dying of cancer and was sick of treatment. She was going to die and he was scared. As the plane descended, he saw what appeared to be a golf course but could have been a cemetery. He realized that in California that it could have been both and this became a secret he has been working on since that moment. He thought it might attract more people to work at a funder parlor. Thomas has often worried about the fact that funeral direction will never be a large market because no one wants to do the job. Funeral directors are seen as grim and ambivalent. But there are exceptions which prove the rule. Poets and clergy often enjoy funerals.

Some people are ethnically disposed to funerals, seeing them as spiritually stimulating. Approval seems rooted in food, drink, music, shame and guilt, kisses of aunts and distant cousins, exultation, outfits or the heart's hunger for homecomings.

The only other people who do not dislike funerals are funeral directors themselves, although the business does have a high attrition rate. Few people otherwise appreciate funerals in any degree.

So Thomas's idea of putting golf and funerals together on one piece of land seemed like a good idea. Using land to receive the dead and play golf could be called a 'Golfatorium'. It would solve what to do after church, when men didn't want to go home. They could say they were visiting their family plot.

Ten acres comprise a standard par four. With eighteen, you have a golf course. Thomas figured he could have a standard sized golf course with a few subtractions and have room for fifteen thousand burials. The idea may seem funny, but Thomas did the math. He could also bundle the two goods as he liked. And in fact, he notes that the impulse to consolidate is the key of many success stories in business in the twentieth century. Thomas then names some examples.

Thomas usually kept ashes in a closet, the ones that weren't picked up by the family, buried, etc. After some years, a few boxes of ashes were never claimed. Thomas would always call, every year, but even after that some were left behind. He always knew that he'd take care of the ashes of his family. But he did think of a process, a combination, known as Cremorialization, to try and sell more cremations. However, he couldn't find investors. But combining things could still be a good idea, particularly because cemeteries are often seen as wasted land. Mixing golf and good grieving seemed a natural combination. He would, however, have to work out awkward details, like when the funerals would happen and when the golfing would occur.



Thomas hated God as his mother was dying. His mother had borne and raised nine children; she knew God but he seemed to be a practical joker. But his mother's faith was not shaken; instead, she believed in redemptive suffering, like the crucifixion of Christ. She read Imitation of Christ daily. And those of Irish decent have a special penchant for handling suffering. However, her mother did not believe in Purgatory or Limbo, thinking that salvation was God's gift and enough to purify us, although this life's suffering could still have meaning and purpose.

As a result, Thomas's mother turned her suffering into prayer. She was in pain and sad to be leaving her family, but she was excited to be going "home". While her body withered, her soul sang. She refused morphine to stay lucid and spoke comforting words to her children.

Thomas believes for this reason that things like golf and funerals can be combined, because the goodness and darkness of life are already placed together. His mother's funeral was both sad but joyous. And the Golfatorium idea lived on.



# Chapter 7, Mary & Wilbur

## Chapter 7, Mary & Wilbur Summary and Analysis

Milford is divided by the Huron River but it is more of a stream when it passes through. It divides the south side from the north, and also divides higher-class from lower-class commercial establishments. The souls and psyches of the inhabitants are also so divided. The town has many nice establishments and Thomas served as president of the Chamber of Commerce, so he should know. It is also a good place to raise and bury families.

Terrors have happened on both sides of the river. Thomas gives some gruesome examples. A fire whistle often signals disaster now to the townspeople. The town looks like a late-century rendition of Lake Wobegon, but it has its share of tragedy. When Thomas and his wife take night walks, she admires architecture while he is reminded of various deaths tied to locations in town. Homes can be made memorable by death that would not have been otherwise. He then describes the burial ground at Oak Grove.

A funeral home has several duties. It must first dispose of the dead, out of sight but still in town. Oak Grove always seemed safe for this reason. Oak Grove Bridge once connected Oak Grove to the other side of town but it fell apart, into the Huron. People had to take a more circuitous route but no one seemed to mind.

Thomas was the only poet in town and, as such, was often asked to write for special occasions, but he typically refused. Then Mary Jackson called. She lives in Milford half the year and lives and works in Hollywood the other half. She played Miss Emily in *The Waltons*. Famous friends of hers visit when she comes back to Milford. Her family are all buried in Oak Grove and they have a plot. She intends on being buried there. When she heard that Oak Grove Bridge fell apart, she was upset and came to see him. She decided she wanted to make her arrangements for her funeral. She was eighty-plus years old and really wanted her procession to cross over Oak Grove Bridge, as she had imagined it for years.

Thomas was worried when Mary refused to be buried in the ground in Oak Grove if she had to be carried around town to get to the funeral home. She then insisted that the bridge be repaired. Mary had the money but she formed a committee for perception's sake, calling Wilbur Johnson, her neighbor and old friend, who agreed that something had to be done. He knew everyone in town, having worked in the produce section of the local market for seventy years. Mary and Wilbur were co-chairs of the committee.

Many in Milford thought the plan would inevitably fail because most never thought about funerals. Few would think it a worthy cause. Mary knew this and called up Thomas to write a poem to attract attention. He agreed. The poem would help memorialize the time. Thomas then thinks that a hundred years ago, death was far more common. But



today death is rarer and so makes more of an impression on people. He is interested that people are both drawn to death and avoid it.

Thomas thinks Mary Jackson can, metaphorically speaking, bring the dead to life. She could reminisce about dead people like no one else. Thomas then notes from the present day that they had buried Wilbur Johnson a few years before but there was no fanfare. She had the gift of voices. Thomas then reproduces the poem he wrote, "At the Opening of Oak Grove Cemetery Bridge".



# Chapter 8, Sweeney

## Chapter 8, Sweeney Summary and Analysis

Thomas Lynch has a poet friend, Matthew Sweeney, who believes he is dying, but he has thought so since 1952. This was because his life had gone well, and he knew that if you love your life in the world, you will lose it. Matthew had written poems and had critical success; he lived in a wonderful part of London, close to emergency care and a variety of superb medical facilities, all in case something went wrong. Thomas had met him in 1989, during the launch of his fourth collection, *Blue Shoes*.

In London, Matthew is thought of as a charming hypochondriac. He has met with any doctor about everything and knows about every ailment, believing himself to have miraculously survived various diseases. Most are dismissive of him, but Thomas wonders whether he isn't a visionary.

Food had brought Sweeney to London, as every national cuisine has a good restaurant there. Matthew's tastes would be uniquely suited to the area. He was an excellent cook with a supreme appreciation for food.

One day, Thomas suggested to Matthew that a student of Carl Jung's once hypothesized that living with the perception of an enormous existential threat produces glandular secretions that can damage the brain, eventually producing a coma. Matthew was concerned and interested, so Thomas provided him with empirical evidence, telling him about the life of a man's body he'd once embalmed. Matthew identified with him. Thomas believes that at birth Matthew grasped what it takes most of us our whole lives to understand: that people die.



# Chapter 9, All Hallows' Eve

## Chapter 9, All Hallows' Eve Summary and Analysis

Thomas wanted to know the day he would die for a variety of reasons, but it was a difficult matter to discover. His gene-pool was little help. Men in his family all died from their hearts in their mid-sixties. He then reviewed the deaths of his various family members. His father died of a heart attack when Thomas was sixteen, at sixty-four. He and Dan had to cress and casket him. Looking at his father's life caused him to consider his own death. The women in his family often lived a long time.

Thomas's grandmothers were powerful women and never fully abdicated power to their husbands. And then when the gender gap began to close, women lived more like men and his mother died twenty-eight months before his father, of cancer. Thomas developed a theory of his mortality, that he could calculate the midpoint of life locating when he started to look back wistfully on his life. Midlife is the moment between birth and death, where we could go either way. It has a kind of balance, floating between the halves of life. Thomas illustrates the feeling by associating it with traveling across the United States.

Thomas was eighteen when he generated his theory, a college student trying to ignore (but not dodge) the draft. He wanted to survive to spend his life with Johanna Berti, a girl who had helped him see that Catholicism was false. At the time, Thomas lived in his father's funeral home, not the one he currently operates. He was taking care of the body of a young man who had shot himself in the mouth with his girlfriend's father's deer rifle when she broke up with him and wouldn't take him back. Thomas thought his face looked ridiculous and then noticed that his eyes were looking in two different directions, one east and one west. Thomas thought this arrangement would give him a balanced vision but he looked absurd. And that is midlife.

Thomas hit midlife one night a few years before after making love with a woman. They had buried his mother that morning. Thomas looked out the window and saw it all that night, the dead body of his mother who had given him life and the body of the woman who made him feel alive still. He looked backward and forward at once. Thomas was forty-one and hopes to live until eighty-two but expected no precision.





# Chapter 10, Uncle Eddie, Inc.

## Chapter 10, Uncle Eddie, Inc. Summary and Analysis

Uncle Eddie was in the suicide clean-up business and it was going well. He needed a separate line, slogan, and an 800 number. He was not sure how to package himself, given the nature of his business, however.

In the past, Thomas would clean up messy deaths for free. One such case was that of a man who had killed himself when his wife characteristically refused to have sex with him in order to look good for her boss in the morning (who she was having an affair with). Thomas and his friend Wes Rice worked until morning to clean up the body.

Thomas is often impressed by those who commit suicide because of how determined they are to do massive and irreparable damage to themselves. All successful suicides display it. Successful homicide is the same. Thomas comments that the body dies in several stages, socially - to the family, somatically - in the nerve endings, and metabolically - when the cells die. Birth has degrees as well: conception (metabolic), viability (somatic) and naming, baptism, etc. (social). These orders are important.

Funerals are meant to nudge the grieving to accept the fact of death, just as baptism does the same for life. Rituals help to manage these weighty matters seriously and sanely. But practical considerations are always relevant and someone must address it.

The order of death is disturbing when it is disrupted, such as when social death comes before somatic death, someone is buried alive. And we always try to control the details of birth. And so suicide seems offensive, subverting Nature/God's intentions, as does homicide. In fact, one might view the fights of the twentieth century as concerning the differences over the nature of life and death. Technology can blur the lines between the two but cannot tell us what it means. Everything becomes customized and left to the experts, but perhaps it should not be.

It is an odd irony of the Baby Boom generation that its parents had planned its birth (around the end of World War II) and so its children would plan for its death. Maybe they never should have messed with nature.

Thomas then transitions to inform the reader that indeed Uncle Eddie had assembled a team, logo, and even uniforms. His slogan? "Why leave a mess? Call TRIPLES!" He printed business cards as well, along with kitchen-magnet cards, and sent them to police and fire stations, along with funeral homes. The phone began to rang soon thereafter, ultimately to once or twice a week. Some murders were brought to his attention, but suicides were his bread and butter. After six months, Eddie dreamed of expansion. He was upset with Dr. Kevorkian, seeing him as a competitor.

Surprisingly, Kevorkian had gotten away with fifty assisted suicides by 1996. Uncle Eddie denies that it is suicide; it's the assistance that there needs to be a market for.



And he was genuinely worried about Kevorkian, which led him to end Triple S. Thomas was sad for him. But he admired those who committed suicide themselves, and not those who did so with 'assistance'. It is probably our nature to die, not our right; we have the ability to kill but not the right. When we do either, we act in the name of God and Justice. Suicide seems to be just as much a killing. The absence of outrage with Kevorkian was an outrage itself.

Could there really be a Right to Die, a Right to Choice, a Right to Assisted Suicide? Many compare this debate to the abortion debate and there is a similar lesson: letting the courts solve the issue will generate a decision no one is happy with. But what if we let it be legal? Where would it end? Could anyone kill themselves at any time for any reason in any way? The courts have allowed protection of 'the life of the mother' to include the protection of any aspect of her life; could the courts prevent a similar definitional slippage for suicide?

Thomas notes that where choice is the highest value, we must live with choice and where life is sacred we have to tolerate life of every sort. But if we have choice, must we let the market take over? Maybe Thomas is wrong, he suggests. Sometimes he has thought of starting up a competitor business with Kevorkian, perhaps to out-do him.

If assisted suicide becomes commonplace, why can't the government establish standards for meaningful living? Perhaps social security checks could be discontinued afterward? Maybe the government will offer counselors. The slippery-slope argument sometimes is right.

Outrageously, Kevorkian will one day be seen as a prophet and so maybe Uncle Eddie was right, maybe it is only a matter of time. Perhaps we should accept the inevitability of the trivialization of death.



# Chapter 11, Jessica, the Hound and the Casket Trade

## Chapter 11, Jessica, the Hound and the Casket Trade Summary and Analysis

There are good and bad days in the funeral direction business. Thomas's occupation requires level-headedness to keep him from constantly putting his foot in his mouth. After all, he sells caskets, embalms bodies and directs funerals. Pollsters find that many people don't much care for such people, although they often like the director they dealt with personally. So Thomas is careful, not telling people what they should and shouldn't do - bad for business and bad form.

It isn't entirely clear what function caskets perform. Dead people don't move and don't care. It isn't clear why it matters what they are placed in. But caskets now have pall bearers and so the casket is displayed in public. Caskets are four-sided, whereas coffins are eight-sided and mostly wooden. Caskets are nicer and suggest something about the box. But both caskets and coffins are important because of the relationships the bodies have to the people who buy the coffins and caskets.

Thomas's funeral home shows twenty-some caskets to choose from and they have everything you might want. They sell a cardboard box for \$79 and a mahogany box for \$8k. Most avoid the extremes no matter what. Thomas also admits that they make a good profit on the caskets. This was exposed by a young 'News Hound' Jessica Mitford, although the fact of profit in this area should be no surprise to anyone with basic economy literacy.

When Thomas came to Milford, Russ Reader wanted to pre-arrange his funeral. He had played college and professional football in his youth and was, accordingly, a large man. He was also something of a 'character'. The two men quickly became friends. Russ wanted his body given to medical science for doctors to practice on him. But Thomas sadly informed him that his body was too large. In any event, Russ did not want a casket but Thomas told him he would have to be in something. Thomas told him that his family would probably make the decision in the end.

Russ died last year in his easy chair watching TV. Thomas came to his house with the hearse. They embalmed him, shaved him and easily fit him into a Batesville casket. His heroics grew after his wake and many laughed aloud at his antics.

Thomas was surprised that Russ fit in the casket but in any event, not all of Russ truly fit in, no one really does. The hurt, forgiveness, anger, pain, praise, thanksgiving, and so on that these people leave in their lives cannot be fit in the casket.



# Chapter 12, Tract

## Chapter 12, Tract Summary and Analysis

February was the month Thomas became a father and the month his father died. He wants to die in February and he wants it to be cold. The ground should have frost as well. He wants a wake and wants others to come and look. He wants the clergy to take part as well but is indifferent to what music is used. Some will want to say poems, and that will be fine. As for money, his family should deal with someone they trust. And Thomas really doesn't want anyone to feel guilty. He wants them to forgive him and to forgive themselves. Let it go at the funeral.

Thomas wants a mess in the snow when he is buried, so that the ground looks unwilling; he wants people to see the casket right until the end. His sons, daughter and grandchildren should be his pallbearers. Thomas's casket should be lowered just after the words are finished. When it is over and only when it is over they should leave. If he is cremated, his ashes should be buried. Food should be served.

Of course, Thomas says this is none of his business as he won't be there but this is free advice. He wants people to feel whatever they'd like for as long as they'd like. He admits that he is trying to direct yet another funeral but his is not the one for him to direct. He gives them a 'coupon' for 'Disregard' and another for 'My Approval'. He wants his family to feel free to ignore everything he has said save 'Love One Another'. He just wants a witness, someone to say it was a sad day and a cold, gray day. If he dies in any other month, he has no advice. He knows they'll know what to do.



# Characters

## Thomas Lynch

Thomas Lynch is an American undertaker, poet and essay writer. He is the author of *The Undertaking* and its main character and was born in 1948. Still living, Lynch is widely known for his poetry and writing, and *The Undertaking* has won several prestigious awards. He is actually the manager of his father's funeral home in Milford, Michigan, Lynch and Sons Funeral Home, despite being a nationally renowned writer.

*The Undertaking* is not a biography of Lynch, nor is it even a chronological series of stories about him. Instead, the book is a set of his own life studies in death and dying from the perspective of an undertaker/poet, a peculiarly unusual combination. In the book, the reader encounters Thomas as a child, as a teenager, as a young adult, a father, and a divorcee. One learns about his relationship with his father, his mother, his brothers, cousins, children, poet friends, co-workers at the funeral home and characters around town in Milford.

While Thomas discusses many of his thoughts, he does not reveal much about his character in his external actions themselves, as recorded in the book. Instead, what one learns about Thomas comes primarily from his inner thought life and commentary on the events from his perspective as author. Thomas is not a dour man, but his life as a poet and undertaker causes him to approach life with a certain seriousness.

This is not to say that he takes life too seriously, for he takes many matters far less seriously than other people do. In fact, in some parts of the book, he seems downright indifferent to horrific events. In any event, Thomas's deep passion for the beauty of life shines through the text, particularly as he labors to bring out the deep connection between life and death.

## Thomas's Father

Many of the characters in *The Undertaking* are incidental to the 'life studies' that the book aims to teach. They mostly feature to illustrate various points about life and death. Thomas's father is something of an exception, finding his way into the book more than any other person in Thomas's life.

Thomas's father founded Lynch and Sons Funeral Home in Milford, Michigan. He employed his sons to work for him and raised them with his mother, who would later die of cancer. Thomas discusses his father's death, and how his father left instructions for how his funeral should be run and how his body should be cared for. He also discusses bringing his body home from Miami, where he died staying with a lady friend.

Thomas's father, to his mind, influenced Thomas's life in a wide range of ways. But what perhaps influenced Thomas the most was his father's deep acquaintance with death



and the causes of death. When Thomas describes growing up, he recalls his mother believing that God would take care of their family, but Thomas's father realized that for the vast majority of cases, God allowed natural laws to work as they otherwise would and that his children could die in innumerable ways. This led Thomas's father to be strongly risk-averse and over-protective, a fear that extended into Thomas's own parenting. Thomas found himself watching his children, just as his father had done to him.

## **Thomas's Mother**

Thomas's mother was a woman of deep and profound faith who encouraged her children to remain faithful to God. She died an agonizing death but approached it as an opportunity for redemptive suffering, striving to become a better person in soul as her body died.

## **Tommy and Nora Lynch**

Tommy and Nora Lynch are Thomas's Irish cousins. When Nora died, she left Thomas the house in West Claire where his great-great-grandfather lived in the nineteenth century.

## **Henry Nugent**

A poet and friend of Thomas's, Thomas discussed his crumbling marriage, painful divorce and long period of mourning to illustrate the connection between love and death.

## **Matthew Sweeney**

Another poet and friend of Thomas's, Matthew is a hypochondriac, who, in Thomas's mind, was born with an intense awareness of the reality of death.

## **Mary Jackson**

An elderly woman and famous actress who lived in Hollywood and Milford; she was responsible for leading the charge to rebuild the Oak Grove Bridge.

## **Thomas Lynch's Children**

Thomas's children are not major characters in the story. However, Thomas is deeply concerned about them due to his sharp awareness of death.



## **Uncle Eddie**

Thomas's uncle who started a suicide clean-up service. However, when Jack Kevorkian began to get away with assisted suicides, he decided to fold up shop.

## **Jack Kevorkian**

The famous "Dr. Death" and advocate of physician-assisted suicide, Kevorkian is harshly condemned by Lynch.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Milford, Michigan**

Thomas's hometown and setting of many of the book's major events.

### **West Clare, Moveen Townland, Ireland**

The town in Ireland where Thomas's cousins Tommy and Nora lived; it is also where Thomas maintains his great-great-grandfather's home to this day, and where he lives part of the year.

### **The Huron River and the Oak Grove Bridge**

The Huron River runs through the middle of Milford and the Oak Grove Bridge that crossed it once fell apart, only to be rebuilt.

### **The Midwinter Conference**

A conference, usually in the West Antilles, held by funeral directors in Michigan. Thomas's parents usually went and he does too.

### **Lynch and Sons Funeral Home**

The funeral home founded by Thomas's father that he runs to the present day.

### **Funerals**

As a funeral director, Thomas has organized and attended many funerals.

### **Redemptive Suffering**

Thomas's mother was a devout Catholic who saw suffering as an opportunity to become morally perfect.

### **Artichoke**

A poem written by Thomas's friend Robin that helped Henry to find his third wife.





## **At the Opening of Oak Grove Cemetery Bridge**

A poem Thomas wrote to commemorate the reopening of the Oak Grove Cemetery Bridge.

## **The Golfatorium**

Thomas's idea for combining a golf course and a cemetery just as life combines the serious and the unserious at the same time.

## **Corpses**

Thomas constantly must collect, clean, embalm and bury corpses as a funeral director.

## **Caskets**

Caskets are more expensive than coffins and come in many varieties. However, they are more important for the living than the dead. The dead don't care, Thomas says.

## **Embalming**

Embalming is the process of preparing corpses for burial, a process that Thomas is quite familiar with.

## **Uncle Eddie, Inc.**

The suicide clean-up business that Thomas's uncle Eddie founded and closed-up.

## **Thomas's Funeral**

In the last chapter, Thomas leaves his family instructions for how to run his funeral but then tells them that in fact his funeral is up to them because he is dead.

# Themes

## Death is About the Living

"The dead don't care." Thomas often remarks. As a funeral director, he always encounters the grieving individuals who are constantly worried about what the particular dead person in question would have wanted, such as funeral arrangements, casket type, pallbearers, order of service, cremation, etc. But Thomas thinks that in our haste to think about what our deaths mean to us, as the ones who die, we forget about what our deaths mean to us, as the ones who mourn the dying.

For Thomas, whether the dead person is worm food or whether her soul is in heaven or hell, she doesn't care about her body anymore. She isn't there. The body, while part of who she was, is no longer who she is. Thomas's role as funeral director makes clear to him the importance of death for the life of the living and he believes that the details of death, for this reason, should be left wholly to the living. In one sense, the details are always left to the living but they often slave away getting things right for those who died.

Thomas doesn't want to put his family through this. In the last chapter, "Tract", Thomas includes instructions for how he wants his family to manage his funeral. He wants to be buried in February, on a cold day. He gives instructions for how he is to be buried, how he wants people to watch him be lowered into his casket, etc. But at the end, he reminds his family that it really isn't about him and that he hereby gives them a "Coupon" to disregard his wishes and do whatever they think is best.

## The Social Meaning of Death and Related Events

Everyone knows that life is for the living, but Thomas Lynch knows that death is too. While this idea is one theme of the book, Thomas draws out a closely related theme as well. Death is not only about the living, it is about the living in certain important ways. Death is a way for grieving people to let go of pain, psychological baggage, anger and guilt, to be sure. Everyone knows this. But many people miss the important social meaning of death, dying and related events like funerals and wakes.

Deaths often disrupt community life. The dead person may have performed a central social function for a particular group, especially as a member of a family. Death is about accepting the loss of this part of the community and about bringing one's self and one's community to move one, heal and reform in a different way. Death is a kind of social realization, but not only of loss. It is also a realization of how human beings are connected to one another and what communities really are made of.

For instance, in Chapter 2, Thomas Lynch discusses William Gladstone's notion that you can measure a people's respect for the laws of the land by how they treat their dead. The treatment of the dead says a lot about a family and a community as a whole.



It speaks to how they grieve, to how they are connected, to their level of care for one another, and even to what their fundamental values are.

## The Deep Connection between Life and Death

All human beings understand that death is both natural and unnatural. Death is one of the only certainties of life; it is natural in that everyone dies. However, the end of life is still shocking and radical; it is a change that everyone must endure and no one understands. Thomas Lynch understands death in both senses but he often emphasizes the naturalness of death, pointing to its continuity with birth and mid-life, about how it gives structure form and meaning to the lives of persons as a whole.

Thomas also sees an intimate connection between life and death because they possess a certain simultaneity. Because death is one boundary of life, death is somehow always with us. This is not only the case because other people are always dying, but because death is the point that every human life is always moving towards and never away from. To Lynch, people often forget this, particularly in a modern world that has significantly extended life, eliminated disease and dramatically reduced infant mortality.

People's homes no longer contain the elderly, and so almost no one dies at home anymore. People place the elderly in nursing homes and hospitals so that they will die far away. Commercial lives allow people to think only of a future full of consumption and pleasure rather than death and many commercial products directly aid in the process of ignoring death.

When death is ignored, it can often be trivialized. The central theme of Chapter 10, *Uncle Eddie, Inc.*, is that Jack Kevorkian and making death legal and therefore a matter of mere choice, which trivializes death. The principle that anyone can kill themselves at any time mocks the sacredness of life. If one sees that life is valuable and that life and death are fundamentally connected, Lynch believes that she will see that physician-assisted suicide is an abomination.

# Style

## Perspective

The perspective of *The Undertaking* is written from the first person with third person elements. For the most part, Thomas Lynch describes his own thoughts, observations and experiences, but he will, from time to time, tell stories about the lives of others, narrating from the third-person point of view. His perspective is particularly unique, however, given his two occupations as a world-class poet and essayist on the one hand and the manager of a small-town funeral parlor on the other.

These two occupations lead Lynch to express a perspective that is profoundly interested in the connection between life and death. He is not macabre or morose, however. He is not obsessed with death, dead bodies or anything of the sort. However, neither is he afraid of death or interested in defeating or ignoring it. He strives to maintain an attitude of balance and continuity towards an event that will happen to all of us.

Lynch is particularly interested in maintaining two things about death: its reality and its profundity. On the one hand, Lynch encourages his reader to remember that the dead are dead; they don't care about what happens to them anymore. The reality of death is that the person who has died is gone. This is a mundane fact but difficult to accept. Lynch wants us to face harsh realities. On the other hand, just because one must face the reality of death, doesn't mean that one must see it as ordinary or meaningless. Far from it. Lynch maintains over and over again that trivializing death and ignoring it are great evils.

## Tone

Thomas Lynch is both a poet and an undertaker. As such, one can imagine that the tone of *The Undertaking* might be dark, dramatic and serious. Not so. This is not to say that Lynch ignores dark events, murders, rapes, the disgusting corpses that he must dispose of or piece back together. It is also not to say that Lynch thinks that death and dying are light-hearted matters not to be taken seriously.

But Lynch's tone strives for a mixture between the light-hearted and the serious, between grieving death and celebrating it, between fighting against death and accepting its inevitability and between the harsh reality of death and its profundity.

The reader does best to understand the tone of *The Undertaking* as an conscious attempt to ascend a dichotomous approach to death and dying that Lynch sets out to criticize, both implicitly and explicitly. Lynch sees some as overcome by death, obsessed with it or with avoiding it. He sees others as desperately struggling to ignore it, to focus only on life and to refuse to accept its reality. But he rejects both attitudes as unhealthy and false.



As a result, both Lynch's topics and his tone reflect an attempt to integrate what is natural and unnatural about death, what is right and what is wrong with it, and what value it gives and what value it takes away from those who endure it.

## Structure

The Undertaking is composed of twelve chapters. They are not strung together chronologically, although they are associated with a very loose sort of order. The chapters also focus on different, but related themes, which is what one should expect from the subtitle of the book "Life Studies in the Dismal Trade." There is no one lesson to be learned from these chapters.

Chapter 1, The Undertaking, introduces the reader to Thomas Lynch, his family, his occupation, his childhood and various deaths in his area. Lynch's argument in the chapter is that death is for the living, not the dead. He focuses on the social and communal aspects of death as the truly meaningful ones. Chapter 2, Gladstone, discusses Lynch's father and his death, along with his father's enthusiasm for funeral direction, along with Lynch's experience taking over for his father. Chapter 3, Crapper, addresses how important avoiding death is to the lives of many.

Chapter 4, The Right Hand of the Father, illustrates the tension within Lynch's character between his faith in God and his fear of death and dying (not for himself as much as for his loved ones). This tension was a tension between his mother and father that has been passed onto to him. Chapter 5, Words Made Flesh, builds on this idea, including the relationship between love and death. Chapter 6, The Golfatorium, emphasizes the simultaneity of the easy-going aspects of life with the profundity of death.

Chapter 7, Mary and Wilbur, defends an attitude of reverence towards death as expressed by the rituals humans use to grapple with it. In Chapter 8, Sweeney, Lynch uses the life of his friend, Matthew Sweeney, to address the forcefulness of the awareness of one's mortality. Chapter 9, All Hallows' Eve records Lynch's attempt to locate the mid-point of his life, which he understands as a representation of the continuity of life and death.

Chapter 10, Uncle Eddie, Inc. is a strong criticism of assisted suicide as the trivialization of death. Chapter 11, Jessica, the Hound and the Casket Trade addresses caskets and their social meaning. Finally, in Chapter 12, Tract, Lynch instructs his family on his preferred funeral arrangements but encourages them to ignore his instructions if they like.

## Quotes

"Over the long haul, The Big One hovers right around ... well, dead nuts on one hundred percent. If this were on the charts, they'd call it the death expectancy and no one would by futures of any kind." Chap. 1, The Undertaking, pp. 4-5

"And he loved to quote Gladstone, the great Victorian Liberal who sounds like a New Age Republication when he wrote that he could measure with mathematical precision a people's respect for the laws of the land by the way they cared for their dead." Chap. 2, Gladstone, p. 18

"Elders grew aged and sickly not upstairs in their own beds, but in a series of institutional venues: rest homes, nursing homes, hospital wards, sanatoria. Which is where they died: the chance, in 1960, of dying in your own bed: less than one in ten. ... This is how my business came to be." Chap. 3, Crapper, p. 36

"As a funeral director, he was accustomed to random and unreasonable damage. He had learned to fear." Chap. 4, The Right Hand of the Father, p. 45

"Events unfold in ways that makes us think of God. They achieve, in their happening, a symmetry and order that would be frightening if assigned to Chance." Chap. 5, Words Made Flesh, p. 62

"A Golfatorium! It would solve, once and for all, the question of Sundays—what to do before or after or instead of church." Chap. 6, The Golfatorium, p. 85

"Sometimes I stand among the stones and wonder. Sometimes I laugh, sometimes I weep. Sometimes nothing at all much happens. Life goes on. The dead are everywhere. Eddie says that's par for the course." Chap. 6, The Golfatorium, p. 99

"Then Mary Jackson called." Chap. 7, Mary and Wilbur, p. 111

"If you love your life in this world, Matthew remembered Paul opining, you will lost it. He loved his life. What sane man wouldn't. Loss, he figured, stalked him with its scythe." Chap. 8, Sweeney, p. 126

"I wanted to know the day I would die." Chap. 9, All Hallows' Eve, p. 139

"Homicide and suicide are verses of the same sad tune, close cousins of the one pathology." Chap. 10, Uncle Eddie, Inc., p. 155

"Perhaps it is our nature to die, not our right." Chap. 10, Uncle Eddie, Inc., p. 166

"Where choice is enshrined we must suffer the choices. Where life is sacred we must suffer the life." Chap. 10, Uncle Eddie, Inc., p. 173



"Both coffins and caskets are boxed for the dead. Both are utterly suitable to the task. Both cost more than most other boxes. It's because of the bodies we put inside them. The bodies of mothers and fathers and sons, daughters and sisters and brothers and friends, the ones we knew and loved or knew and hated, or hardly knew at all, but know someone who knew them and is left to grieve." Chap. 11, Jessica, the Hound and the Casket Trade, p. 183

"It's yours to do—my funeral—not mine. The death is yours to live with once I'm dead. So here is a coupon for Disregard. And here is another marked My Approval. Ignore, with my blessings, whatever I've said beyond Love One Another. Live Forever." Chap. 12, Tract, p. 199

"Of course, any other month you're on your own. Have no fear—you'll know what to do. Go now, I think you are ready." Chap. 12, Tract, p. 199



## Topics for Discussion

How does Thomas Lynch's job as funeral director give him a unique perspective on death? What are beliefs about death that he does not share about others?

For Lynch, what are funerals really about? What social role do they play?

What is Lynch's criticism of assisted suicide?

Explain Lynch's idea for starting the Golfatorium. What gives him the idea? And what broader lesson about a certain juxtaposition does he draw from it?

Explain why Lynch decided that he wanted to know when he would die and how he proceeded to figure it out. When he made his discovery, what broader lesson about life and death does he draw from it?

What did Thomas Lynch learn from his father and William Gladstone? Why did he decide they were right?

Lynch describes himself as a mixture of a feature of his mother's and a feature of his father's. What are these two features and how does he combine them?

What point is Lynch trying to make in the last chapter, when he gives his family instructions for his funeral?