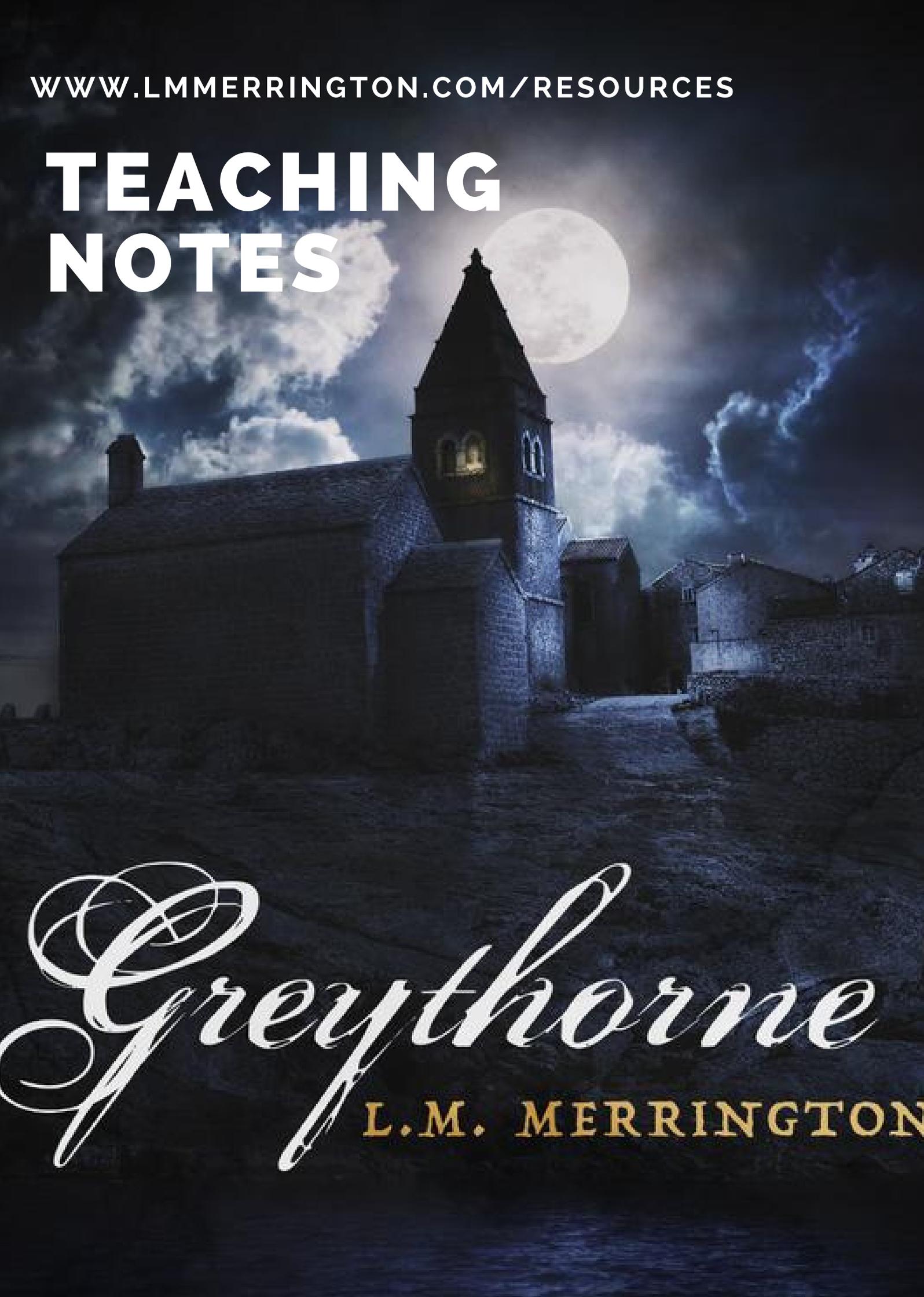


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# TEACHING NOTES



*Greythorne*  
L.M. MERRINGTON

## TEACHING NOTES

**Greythorne**

By L.M. Merrington

**About the Author**

Louise Merrington is an author and editor with over 20 years of publishing experience. Under the name L.M. Merrington, she is the author of two Gothic mystery novels, *Greythorne* and *The Iron Line*, and a collection of interconnected Victorian-inspired fantasy short stories, *The Light at the Edge of the World and Other Stories*.

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**Blurb**

*How did Lucy Greythorne die?*

*From the moment Nell Featherstone arrives at Greythorne Manor as a governess to eight-year-old Sophie, she finds herself haunted by the fate of the mistress of the house, and entranced by the child's father, the enigmatic Professor Nathaniel Greythorne.*

*When a violent storm reveals Lucy's body is not in her grave, Nell becomes suspicious about the Professor's research. But what she discovers in his laboratory will turn all her ideas about life and death, morality and creation on their head.*

*Enthralled by a man walking a fine line between passion and madness, Nell must make an impossible choice between life, death, and life after death, where any mistake could be her last.*

## **THEMES**

*Greythorne* is a Gothic-inspired novel. Gothic novels became popular in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and are characterised by a mixture of horror and romanticism.

What are the major themes of *Greythorne*? How are they similar to those of other Gothic novels, such as *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre* or *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*? How are they different?

What aspects of *Greythorne*, such as setting or plot, can be characterised as distinctly Gothic? Why?

### **Redemption**

Many of the characters in *Greythorne* seek redemption for their actions. In what ways do the following characters express a need for or a belief in redemption? How does this affect their choices and relationships with other characters?

- Nell
- Sophie
- Lucy
- Jonas

### **Morality**

Nell notes that she was “raised in Brookvale’s strict Methodist tradition, with its emphasis on justice, service and reason and, although my faith had been challenged at times, I still felt it to be strong and robust. I knew where I stood on questions of life, death and resurrection, and I shrank from the thought of mere humans trying to overthrow the natural order of things” (pp86–87).

How are religious symbolism and themes incorporated into the text? How do Nell’s religious beliefs influence her moral choices? How do they bring her into conflict with events in the story?

In the epilogue, Nell says, “I am not the Professor, for I do not seek personal glory, and I am motivated by love, the very opposite of evil. That, surely, makes us different” (p217).

In this scene, she is forced to make a choice between her abstract moral position and an action that will save Sophie. Do you think she makes the right choice? Why/why not? Do you think this action will change her as a person (perhaps making her more like the Professor?), or is the action itself rendered less repulsive because her motives are good?

### **Choice**

Many of the characters in *Greythorne* are forced to make difficult choices, have choices denied to them by circumstance, or live to regret the choices they’ve made.

Jonas says “By the time we came here things were so far gone I hardly noticed...now how can I ever be forgiven?” (p186). What are the actions he regrets and what does he feel is the only solution? Why does he choose this?

In the second-last sentence of the epilogue, Nell says, “And in that moment I decide” (p217). Why did Merrington choose not to explicitly detail Nell’s decision or its aftermath, and instead leave it up to the reader to imagine?

## **SETTING**

What are the main places in *Greythorne* where the action takes place? What is the effect of confining the action to a single main setting? How does this restricted setting affect the plot?

What are some of the words and phrases used in the novel to describe Grimly village and Greythorne Manor? How do the descriptions of these places make you feel?

How does the author use imagery and sensory descriptions to build tension in the description of Greythorne Manor?

Greythorne Manor is described as rambling and features many discrete sections, such as the library, Lucy’s bedroom and the secret passage. How does Merrington describe the house? In what ways is it more akin to a character than a setting?

### **Descriptive elements**

The environment plays a significant role in the story, and descriptions of the environment are crucial to both the setting and foreshadowing of later parts of the story. Consider the following descriptions of elements of the environment:

#### *Wind*

- “The wind, fresh, biting through my coat and tangy with the smell of the sea, whipped my hair out of its neat bun and flung it into my eyes; my skirts tangled around my legs” (p30)
- “The September day was crisp and clear, though a brisk wind blew in from the sea, chilling my bones in spite of the shining sun” (p61)
- “The wind had picked up and was wuthering round the house once more with the grief of a thousand lost souls” (p161)

#### *Sea*

- “Around the foot of the island the sea crashed and foamed against jagged rocks” (p17)
- “It was a small cape of rocks, the furthestmost tip of the island, against which the sea pounded, throwing up cascades of wild salt spray” (p61)

### Nature

- “The path...wound its way through tufts of hardy grass and weedy bushes, all battered by the sea wind and salt spray, yet miraculously thriving”(p29)
- “Around the house grew a few tenacious trees, mostly pines, standing indefatigable in the face of wind and sea. Yet the greenery did little to render the house more welcoming, and the turf underfoot was rocky and uncultivated, with nothing growing but some tufty grass.” (p31)
- “...the stunted bushes and trees growing among the rocks.” (p61)

How does Merrington use these descriptions to develop a sense of isolation?

*Writing task:* Choose a contained setting (real or imagined), such as a building or room. Write two descriptions of it – the first with the aim of making the reader feel happy and secure; the second with the aim of making the reader feel anxious and isolated. How do these descriptions differ in the language and imagery that you use?

### Cliffhangers, foreshadowing and twists

Many authors use cliffhangers at the ends of chapters to keep the reader enthralled or to generate a sense of foreboding. Although Merrington does not generally use traditional cliffhangers – which leave the protagonist in immediate physical danger – she often ends chapters with a description or reflection that generates a sense of unease. This foreshadowing of future events also occurs throughout the book. Consider the following chapter endings:

- “I waved to her...and she waved back, but her eyes were troubled” (p13)
- “As sleep claimed me, I wondered again what had happened to Lucy Greythorne, and what would become of her daughter” (p70)
- “...no doubt many a prisoner had gone to the gallows with a more cheerful countenance than that with which I approached this meal” (p88)
- “I fell asleep to disquieting dreams of gloomy old houses and murdered brides in the cellar” (p98)
- “...if ever there was a place to be haunted by the unquiet dead it was Greythorne Manor” (p111)
- “Tonight I will take Sophie and make for the boat, and we will either reach safety or die in the attempt. Farewell to this accursed rock and all its inhabitants, living and dead, forever” (p154)

How do these chapter endings work both to create disquiet in the reader and as devices for driving the story forward?

In what other ways does Merrington foreshadow the unveiling of Greythorne Manor’s secrets? Does this foreshadowing make you expect a certain outcome?

*Greythorne* contains two major twists: one at the climax of the novel (where the Professor's research is revealed) and one in the epilogue (where Nell makes a choice). How does Merrington set up the reader to have a certain expectation of events, and how does she then circumvent these expectations with the twist?

## **CHARACTERS**

### **Nell Featherstone**

*Greythorne* is told through the eyes of Nell Featherstone, an 18-year-old orphan who has been engaged as a governess at Greythorne Manor. How does this first-person narrative colour our reading of events and our perception of other characters?

There is very little physical description of Nell in the book. She describes herself as "no beauty" but "passable" and "respectable" (p46). Why do you think Merrington has chosen not to focus on her physical characteristics? What does Nell's description of herself indicate about her self-image and her values?

What are some of Nell's qualities? What are some of her deficiencies? How do these affect the choices she makes in the story?

### **Professor Nathaniel Greythorne**

Nell says of the Professor, "I had expected a notable eccentric, not this charming and, truth be told, rather handsome specimen" (p47). How do other characters in the book, such as Elsie Drabble and Frances Greenslade, refer to the Professor, and how does this shape your (and Nell's) mental image of him before he appears?

Although the Professor is the book's antagonist, he also exhibits some positive character traits. What are some of these and what effect do they have on developing him as a character?

The Professor calls his work "arguably the greatest scientific discovery since Galileo" (p171). What is his motivation for choosing the path that he has? Why is it important that characters have a clear motivation?

### **Sophie Greythorne**

Consider the following descriptions of Sophie Greythorne:

- "on the verge of becoming an uncouth wildling" (p5)
- "pale and wispy, with a bone structure as fine as a bird's and a complexion the colour of milk" (p36)
- "old beyond her years" (p38)
- "not a young lady" (p41)
- "a little imp" (p42)
- "a naturally inquisitive spirit" (p60)
- "she clearly had her father's brilliance, and also an innate tenacity" (p71)

- “enormous strength of character” (p72)

How does the relationship between Nell and Sophie change as the book progresses? How are these changes reflected in Nell’s descriptions of Sophie?

Sophie is in many ways the focal point of the story. In what ways is she the focus of the Professor’s, Nell’s and Lucy’s actions and choices?

Is Sophie a likeable character? Why/why not? Do your impressions of her change once it’s revealed what has been done to her?

### **Lucy Greythorne**

Lucy Greythorne is never physically present in the book, having died five years before the events of the novel, and her voice is only heard briefly through her letters (pp150-154). Why do you think she is referred to only in letters or through the memories of other characters, rather than through a flashback to her life?

The Professor tells Nell that “in many ways you remind me of her [Lucy]” (p90). What are some of the similarities between Nell and Lucy? What are some differences?

### **Other characters**

#### *Jonas*

What is the nature of Jonas’s relationship with Lucy? How does this influence the events of the story, and his choices?

Jonas’s death (pp184-187) is a particularly poignant moment in the story. How does this scene change your opinion of him? How does his death fit in with the greater theme of redemption?

#### *Elsie Drabble*

Elsie is the first character from Grimly that Nell encounters. What role does their conversation on the train play in setting up or foreshadowing later aspects of the story?

#### *Frances and Arthur Greenslade*

What role do the Greenslades play in furthering the narrative? What symbolism do they and the inn hold for Nell?

## **STRUCTURE**

*Greythorne* has a three-act structure:

**Act 1 – The Setup** – an inciting incident that starts the protagonist on the path of the story and establishes the main characters;

**Act 2 – The Confrontation** – tension builds and the protagonist is ultimately confronted with a major choice or discovery that prompts a turning point in the story;

**Act 3 – The Resolution** – the story is resolved, with all major points of tension being brought to a head in the climax.

Can you identify where each of the acts begins/ends? Are the acts of similar lengths?

What are the major turning points, conflicts or twists in the story? How do these affect the rhythm of the story?

How is tension built and released?

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

### **The Victorian era (1837–1901)**

What in the text indicates that it is set in the 1890s rather than the present day?

What were some of the major social issues of the era and how are these reflected in the story?

### **Women**

There are indications in the text that women have certain expectations placed upon them in terms of what they can and cannot do. What does the text indicate about women's roles and aspirations in the Victorian era?

Here are some examples:

- Nell's education as a governess "had not focused on the natural sciences; it was not considered proper for young ladies." (p37)
- Nell chides Sophie that "young ladies do not dash about so." (p41)
- Nell ponders Sophie's future, noting that she would probably have to either marry well or make her own way in the world, and that both options would require "a good education and refinement of character." (p57)

In what ways does Nell conform to the ideals of a Victorian woman? In what ways does she differ?

How are Victorian ideals of motherhood portrayed in the relationships between Lucy, Sophie and Nell?

In what ways does Sophie epitomise a spirit of female rebellion?

Do you believe any aspects of Victorian womanhood are still pervasive in society today? If so, what?

### **The governess**

The governess is a popular figure in Victorian and Gothic literature. In Victorian times, being a governess was virtually the only respectable job for a middle-class woman without family support. However, governesses occupied an in-between space in society, being

neither servants nor part of the family, and were often treated with contempt by both groups.

In what ways does Nell show she's conscious of the precariousness of her social position?

How does Nell's role as governess influence her relationships with Sophie, the Professor and Jonas?

How does her job influence the choices that she is forced to make?

Why do you think Merrington chose to make the main character both an orphan and a governess?

### **Death and disease**

In the nineteenth century, before the development of many aspects of modern medicine, including antibiotics and vaccines, death rates were high. Industrial centres in particular often suffered from appalling living conditions, overcrowding, unclean drinking water and poor sanitation. Children often succumbed to childhood diseases that have now been almost eradicated in the developed world, and many women and babies died in childbirth. It was not uncommon for people to have big families but have only a small number of children survive to adulthood. In this context, scientists were naturally pushing to find new ways of combating death and disease. Merrington offers Professor Greythorne's solution as being simply a natural extension of these impulses.

Although Professor Greythorne's reanimation of the dead is an extreme, fictional example, the debate in medicine and science about whether things *should* be done just because they *can* be is very real. Can you think of some examples in modern medicine where this debate is occurring?

### **FURTHER READING**

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