John William Dunne was an aircraft designer. Dunne’s book ‘An Experiment with Time’, published in 1927, was a sensation. In it, he described these and other precognitive dreams he had experienced. He encouraged his readers to keep a dream diary, and to train themselves to notice and develop their abilities to see the future.

Dunne even claimed that some of his own aircraft designs had come to him from the future, in his dreams.

To make sense of these strange happenings, Dunne proposed that time takes place on parallel planes. The time that we experience passing in our waking lives can be observed from within another timeframe, our dreams, for example. In theory, there may be an infinite regress of times.

**JB Priestley was one of Dunne’s biggest fans and wrote several ‘time plays’ inspired by him, of which An Inspector Calls is just one. Just like Dunne in his dreams, the characters experience the death of Eva before it is announced to them.**

But if we’re going to continue our own travels back in time, we could ask: where had Dunne got his ideas from?

One possible answer to that question comes from the future, that’s to say, from Christopher Nolan.

"Time is the most cinematic of subjects," Nolan said in an interview for American National Public Radio. "Before the movie camera came along, human beings had no way of seeing time backwards, slowed down, sped up."

Nolan is absolutely right. When people watched the first films they experienced an uncanny sense that a series of still photographs was being converted into a stream of flowing time. Some of the earliest films experimented with the strange ways in which moving pictures could tell a story through time, and yet were also somehow an illusion of time. Audiences loved to see special effects or entire films run in reverse.

A second possible answer about Dunne’s sources has to do with that famous physicist, Albert Einstein. Early in the twentieth century, Einstein proposed time dilation as a part of his special theory of relativity. If you are standing still with a clock in your hand, a moving clock – that’s to say, an extremely fast-moving clock! - is perceived to be ticking slower than it.

We could give a lot more answers to show how people were fascinated by the science and ideas of time in the early twentieth century, but I’ll stop there and move onto one last, crucial question for your GCSE study.

How does knowing about Dunne and his influence on Priestley change our interpretation of the play?

For one thing, Dunne’s sense of time existing in multiple dimensions gives a new way of thinking about destiny and morality. The traditional, Christian model was that God would judge everyone for their actions at the end of time**. For Priestley, the new science of time gives us a way to understand and take responsibility for our actions. We don’t need to wait for judgement day, and we don’t need an external God. Instead, we can understand and take responsibility for ourselves. We can mould the future how we want it.**

Priestley was also very concerned about ordinary people, and a second that he liked about Dunne’s book was the way that Dunne said anybody could train themselves to see the future in their dreams. It wasn’t just for clever, educated or privileged people. **So, in just this way, Inspector Goole enables all the characters in the play to see the future for themselves.**

We can do some creative interpretation if we think of the Inspector not as a police officer, but as a scientist, tracing out the facts of the case. **Priestley’s scientist, if that’s what he is, is a new way of thinking for a new era. He isn’t in awe of the English class system, he isn’t swayed by prejudices and politeness. He calmly goes about discovering the true facts, making explanations of the past … and predictions into the future.** Even if you don’t accept Dunne’s precognitive dreams, you could say that, in general, science can see into the future. Psychology, for example, might predict when people are going to do bad things, like the characters in the play.

So, we could argue that Priestley’s play is based on Dunne’s experiments: and more broadly, we could argue that Inspector Goole offers Priestley’s characters a modern, class-free way of understanding and predicting people’s behaviour: even seeing into the future. Even without a time machine, perhaps, a scientist is a time traveller.