**Who is the Inspector?**

**“...he’s giving us the rope – so that we’ll hang ourselves.”**

We don’t know where the Inspector came from, and by the end of the play we’re not even sure if he’s real. We are told that he ***“need not be a big man but he creates at once an impression of massiveness, solidity and purposefulness”****.* The stage directions tell us he speaks ***“carefully, weightily, and has a disconcerting habit of looking hard at the person he addresses before actually speaking.”***

Based on his questioning techniques and his treatment of the family, Sheila is the first to realise that there is more to the Inspector than meets the eye. At the beginning of Act 2 she says, ***“I don’t understand about you”***. Who is he?

More importantly than who he is, or whether or not he’s a real inspector, what is his purpose in the play?

**Questions to consider:**

* What is the role of the Inspector?
* Who is he?
* What does he represent?
* What is his importance in the play?
* How does Priestley use him?

**Starting point: the Inspector’s name**

1. What does the **title of ‘Inspector’** suggest that his role within the play will be?
2. **‘Goole’ is a seaport town** at the mouth of the River Humber, in East Yorkshire. Why might this be relevant to the Inspector? What does it suggest about his possible role? (Hint: think of the verbs ‘fish’ and ‘trawl’)
3. The Inspector’s name sounds like **‘ghoul’**.Why might this be relevant? What does it suggest about the reasons behind the Inspector’s presence at the Birling household?

The mystery of the Inspector’s identity is one that the play never answers. One answer, of course, is that **he is a dramatic device**; without him the play could not happen. But given that the other characters are all believable and realistic, audiences often want to ask about the reality of the Inspector too.

It is Gerald who discovers that the Inspector is not who he claims to be. He helps the Birlings unpick the Inspector’s story of the girl until there seems to be nothing left of it. Sheila and Eric hang on to the conviction that it was ‘anything but a joke’ while accepting that there may have been more than one girl and that no girl may have committed suicide.

**Some possibilities:**

* He’s a mouthpiece for Priestley’s ideas – or even Priestley himself
* He’s God
* He’s the voice of conscience, there to teach the audience of 1947 not to repeat the mistakes of the past (1912)
* He’s the child Eva Smith was pregnant with
* He’s a dream
* He’s a time traveller
* He’s a real police inspector

**What do you think of these ideas? How do they link to what we’ve looked at so far?**

Some of the Inspector’s parting words are ‘We do not live alone. We are all members of one body’. Priestley himself was particularly interested in the ideas of the famous psychologist Jung, who believed that in our dreams we lose our identity and enter the world of the **‘collective unconscious’** where we all share ancient, universal experiences and the things we dream of have a common significance.

A particular passage in Jung struck Priestley because of a dream he himself had had. Jung stated that ‘dreams may give expression to… telepathic visions’. Priestley had dreamt of being shot in the person of a much younger man – “a student or something of that kind” – by uniformed officers. Describing this experience he said, “I will swear that… the blind weakness that washed over me there was somebody’s last moments and that my consciousness had relived them”.

It’s not a great step from such ideas to the notion of time and space travelling telepathically, but the more important idea is that telepathy is possible because, in our collective subconscious, we are “all members of one body”. The idea of an individual’s identity becomes more shadowy and less definite.



**It is clear on a number of occasions that the Inspector knows what is going to happen.**

Look again at these moments in the play and note down what they reveal about the Inspector:

* at the end of Act 2 he says he is “waiting”, just before Eric enters.
* from the beginning of Act 3 to his exit, it is quite clear that the Inspector is working under terrific time pressure, often looking at his watch or stating that he “hasn’t much time”. Is this because he knows that news of a girl’s suicide is about the reach the household? Or something else?

But he claims there are limits to his knowledge:

* when he has shown Sheila the photograph he professes not to know *why* she is upsetting herself over it. “That’s something I have to find out”, he says.
* has he ever actually lied to them about what he knows and how he knows it? Or about the identity of the girl?

**Who do you think the Inspector is?**