

The Nightbuilder

by C M Taylor

This resource is based on the [Inventive podcast](#). The podcast mixes engineering fact with fiction. Each podcast features an interview with an engineer. That interview was used as inspiration by a variety of authors and poets to create a piece of fiction.

C M Taylor

C M Taylor is a novelist, screenwriter and lecturer. He uses this pen name because there was already another author called Craig Taylor.

Craig takes Roma's interview, and love of concrete, to create a story about a mysterious Nightbuilder, and the Mayor of a run-down seaside town.

Your Name:

Class:

Teacher:

1. Meet the Engineer

Roma Agrawal

Structural Engineer, author and broadcaster

Roma grew up in the United States and India. In India maths and physics was a way to a prestigious career. When Roma was 16 she came to the UK to study A-levels. She studied maths and physics, but nobody suggested she study engineering.

Whilst at University Roma worked alongside some engineers. She immediately realised that this was what she wanted to do - *"engineering brings together maths and science with the practicality of making stuff"*.

Roma became a structural engineer. One of her first projects was to be involved in designing the foundations of the Shard in London. Roma was one of the few women working on the shard. Rather than seeing that as a disadvantage, Roma says that being a woman, young and of colour helped her stand out from other people, *"people remember you"* she says.



"If the foundations do not work you will get Pisa."



"My personal wish for a superpower would be to be able to swish concrete like Magneto from X-Men ... I would like equivalent powers over concrete"

Listen to Roma's podcast



nustem.uk/inventive/#roma

Roma is passionate about her career, *"engineering is all around you, it is a way to make a difference."* This became particularly important when Roma experienced personal struggles to conceive a child and with her emotions afterwards. Roma states, *"the built environment has an impact on how we live"*, *"the ultimate engineering is that we can create life."*

Roma is currently an author and a broadcaster, writing about engineering for children and adults.

C M Taylor takes Roma's passion for engineering and love for concrete and turns it into a story about the Nightbuilder.

The Nightbuilder

In English, we need to make inferences about text.

Inference means to look at the evidence we have and make a prediction.

Look at the title of the story. We will make some predictions about the text based on the title.

Think about:

- Why is the word “Nightbuilder” all one word? Why does it have a capital letter?
- What does the name suggest?
- What do we know about Roma? How does this affect first impressions about the story?
- Why are they building at night?
- What questions do you have?
- What do you think that the story is going to be about?

3. Activity: Text analysis

The Nightbuilder

C M Taylor

Although I did not notice at the time – bogged down as I was in **turgid** council business - the first inkling of the events which were to transform my **dilapidated** seaside town into a place of global fame – and in so doing, loosen the bonds of my own **mournful** emotional life – was a news report of the **perplexing** overnight appearance of a 40 metre-tall concrete mangrove tree on the fourth plinth of London's Trafalgar Square.

To Londoners **accustomed** to their plinth being variously adorned with sculptures of bronze thumbs, of blue chickens and of horse skeletons, the appearance of such an unusual object was not even, well, that unusual, even if its extraordinary height had Nelson himself squinting across from his column over into the canopy. But when the office of the Mayor of London came out to say it had definitely not commissioned the huge concrete tree – a tree deemed by the Royal Horticultural Society, after **punctilious** investigation, to be a perfect likeness of the sweet-scented apple mangrove in every single way: bark, leaves, flowers, fruit – then it was clear that something very much was up.

The second sign – and this I did notice; heard it on the radio one Saturday morning, finishing up some financially **perilous** council paperwork – was a five-storey concrete helter-skelter appearing overnight in the car park of a shuttered shopping centre in a high-rise part of inner city Leeds. In quick succession – and by now the source of these concrete **improvisations** was being nicknamed in the press as The Nightbuilder, The Blue Circle, The Dark Mixer – there materialised a small concrete chapel adjacent to a small concrete mosque in the unused side-garden of a Cardiff nursing home; a concrete youth club on the site of a **derelict bothy** on the outskirts of salty Peterhead, and a much-needed concrete annexe to the much-loved Thetford library.

Turgid: tedious, boring

Dilapidated: run down

Mournful: feeling of sadness or grief

Preplexing: confusing

Accustomed: in the habit of

Punctilious: Showing attention to detail

Perilous: dangerous

Improvisations: doing something that is not planned beforehand

Derelict: disused or neglected

Bothy: a small hut

3. Activity: Text analysis continued

The Nightbuilder

The first paragraph of a fiction text is important. It introduces the characters we will meet throughout the text and creates a setting the reader will engage with.

Re-read the opening paragraph and answer the questions.

Paragraph 1:

Although I did not notice at the time – bogged down as I was in turgid council business - the first inkling of the events which were to transform my dilapidated seaside town into a place of global fame – and in so doing, loosen the bonds of my own mournful emotional life – was a news report of the perplexing overnight appearance of a 40 metre-tall concrete mangrove tree on the fourth plinth of London's Trafalgar Square.

1. What impressions do you get of the main character?

2. What image do you have of the seaside town in which the story is set?

3. The story is based on an interview with Roma. From what we know about Roma, why do you think concrete is introduced at this early point in the story?

Use references from the text to support your points.

3. Activity: Text analysis continued

The Nightbuilder

Although I did not notice at the time – bogged down as I was in turgid council business - the first inkling of the events which were to transform my dilapidated seaside town into a place of global fame – and in so doing, loosen the bonds of my own mournful emotional life – was a news report of the perplexing overnight appearance of a 40 metre-tall concrete mangrove tree on the fourth plinth of London’s Trafalgar Square.

1. What impressions do you get of the main character?

Before answering the question re-read the initial paragraph. Think about...

- From what you have learned from the initial paragraph, does the main character find her job interesting?
- What does the main character want to do, and why?
- Does the first paragraph suggest the main character is happy with her life? What evidence do you have to support your answer?

3. Activity: Text analysis continued

The Nightbuilder

Although I did not notice at the time – bogged down as I was in turgid council business - the first inkling of the events which were to transform my dilapidated seaside town into a place of global fame – and in so doing, loosen the bonds of my own mournful emotional life – was a news report of the perplexing overnight appearance of a 40 metre-tall concrete mangrove tree on the fourth plinth of London’s Trafalgar Square.

2. What impressions do you get of the seaside town in which the story is set?

In the first paragraph of The Nightbuilder, C M Taylor describes the place in which the central character lives. . .

3. Activity: Text analysis continued

The Nightbuilder

Although I did not notice at the time – bogged down as I was in turgid council business - the first inkling of the events which were to transform my dilapidated seaside town into a place of global fame – and in so doing, loosen the bonds of my own mournful emotional life – was a news report of the perplexing overnight appearance of a 40 metre-tall concrete mangrove tree on the fourth plinth of London’s Trafalgar Square.

3. The story is based on an interview with Roma. From what we know about Roma, why do you think concrete is introduced at this early point in the story?

The Nightbuilder

C M Taylor

The story continues...

That Sunday I lay in bed until mid-afternoon, something I had done often in the blissful early days of my marriage, but never done since the descent of my tragic **solitude**. That Sunday, I contemplated the ceiling above my bed and I meditated on these concrete buildings materialising impossibly across the country, and I hit upon a plan.

Solitude: being on your own

'I won't be in for a couple of weeks,' I told my council secretary Jim as I entered my office on the promenade on the Monday morning. He looked up quizzically – after all, I was a known workaholic, and had not taken a holiday - nor even left the town - since my husband and daughter had been swept out to sea some twelve years before.

'Anything wrong?' Jim asked.

'Nothing wrong. I need to go on a mayoral trip. There is a travel fund included in my allowable expenses, is that right?'

I knew there was, I had checked. But I waited for Jim to verify.

'Yes.' He pulled up a file on the computer he was working on, squinted at a spread sheet. 'Seven thousand pounds a year.' He leaned back in his chair, peered up at me. 'A fund you've never touched before, Lady Mayor – we usually give it to the hospital.'

'And I am at **liberty** to withdraw all that from the expenses account?'

Liberty: allowed to do something; free

'Yes, but do you mind me asking...'

4. Activity: Character development continued

'I do, mind, yes,' I said and walked out of the Mayoral office. I didn't want yet to tell. For many reasons, but chiefly in case I failed.

Out on the **deserted** promenade, sea spray lashed up the breakwater, aiming itself at grim, pugilistic gulls. But beyond that, no movement could be seen. Shuttered cafes and B&Bs stretched out either side of the office behind me. Not one soul had ventured out.

Shouldering my overnight bag, I walked to the station and took the first train to London. I had decided not to visit the fourth plinth, its height and visibility made the risk of my being seen and stopped too high, so on arrival I simply took another train, this one East to Thetford, later approaching that town's library on foot, and bending down to chip surreptitiously a small flake off its wall with the chisel I held concealed up my sleeve. Bagging up the sample, I returned to the train station and made my way to Leeds, obtaining another bagged, surreptitious concrete sample – this time from the **thronged** helter skelter – before traveling North again, to Peterhead now, obtaining a third concrete sample from the library in what is traditionally known as the middle of the night, but at a time actually closer to dusk than it was to dawn.

If my B&B host in Peterhead was surprised to be woken by an un-booked stranger's **staunch** rapping on their window, they betrayed no such emotion and I was able to take some sleep before the long journey South to Cardiff, where a fourth sample was taken from the mosque, a fifth from the chapel, and a courier summoned to bike the samples at haste to a chemical analysis lab in the Welsh capital.

I did not sit and wait impatiently for the results of the express chemical sample analysis I had commissioned, but instead – following through my plan - I journeyed West through Wales, to the port of Holyhead where I boarded a ferry to Dublin.

Deserted: Empty

Thronged: full of people

Staunch: loyal or committed; (of a wall) strong or firm.

4. Activity: Character development continued

My plan, such as it was, ran as follows...

While the first mysterious concrete construction to appear had graced the capital London, since then The Night Builder – the name on which the press had now settled – had progressed to build in the north of England, to build in Scotland, and in Wales. A pattern suggesting that Ireland was next.

Where it was my firm intention to catch them in the act.
But how?

Well, as the ferry progressed and the land ahead configured itself to Dublin, the report from the chemical analyst appeared on my phone.

It was just as I had hoped.

Each of the five concrete samples I had submitted showed a very particular mix of concrete. A certain type and percentage of lime, a certain type and percentage of cement, and so on. The Night Builder, this **maestro** of the form, had a favoured recipe. And as each cement mixing works had their own house mix, it was not long before I was able to determine which works in Ireland – The Night Builder's predicted next stop - habitually mixed the favoured **tipple**.

Happily, there was just one such works.

Departing Dublin in a hire car, I drove West across Ireland to the town of Sligo, parked up outside the cement works and hunkered down with food and drink and the intention to wait indefinitely.

But my wait was not to be **onerous**, was neatly prescribed in fact by the arrival at exactly 11:30pm – so the digital clock embedded in my dash informed – of an estate car whose solitary male occupant stepped out and unlocked the cement works' gates before checking his phone and peering off into the darkness.

Maestro: teacher, or skilled craftsman

Tipple: alcoholic drink

4. Activity: Character development continued

Soon enough, behind me a low rumbling sound struck up, preceding the arrival of a cement lorry which halted beside the waiting man.

A dark arm shot out from the open lorry window to hand cash to the man who pocketing it, returned to his car, disappearing quickly.

As the cement lorry drove inside, I climbed from my hire car and followed.

There was to be hedging nor dodging. In life I am reticent, until I am direct, and tonight I intended to be direct. Inside the cement yard, the lorry was being reversed into position beneath the exit chute of the corrugated cement silos.

'Night Builder,' I shouted over the rumble, approaching the lorry on foot.

'Night Builder,' I called again.

A balaclaved face craned from the lorry's driver's side window, framed eyes regarding me dispassionately.

'I'm not the police, or a journalist, and I don't work for this cement works,' I said, nearing.

'Who are you then?' The Night Builder asked, her voice steady - more intrigued than anxious.

I told her who I was - the Mayor of a **recessional**, increasingly dilapidated seaside town, a town going to seed around me just as I ran to seed within it. A town in great need of something to bring in the crowds, to cause a buzz.

Recessional: economic hardship

4. Activity: Challenging stereotypes continued

The Night Builder now eased open the driver's-side door as I spoke. She stepped down from the cabin and approached me, dressed head to toe in cement grey - as much H&M as trad superhero garb.

'I've tried everything,' I continued, 'We've asked **Anthony Gormley** for a statement piece. We've asked **Anish Kapoor**. Neither replied.'

'So, you're Gormless,' quipped the Night Builder.

'Suffering Kapoverty,' I replied.

I saw a smile crease her grey balaclava. 'So, what exactly do you want?' she said.

I hesitated, closed my eyes, remembered the last holiday I had taken with my husband and daughter. Before the water claimed them. I remembered the Italian bell tower I stood beneath, one arm around my husband, one around my girl, looking up at the famous structure as it tilted away almost comically by the old town's cathedral.

Anthony Gormly: sculptor
Creator of the Angel of the North in Gateshead

Anish Kapoor: sculptor.
Creator of ArcelorMittal Orbit sculpture in Olympic Park, London

4. Activity: Challenging stereotypes continued

The Nightbuilder

We meet 'The Nightbuilder' for the first time halfway through the story.

Is this what you expected? Up until this point did the author lead you to believe The Nightbuilder is a woman?

'Who are you then?' The Night Builder asked, **her** voice steady - more **intrigued than anxious**.

What does this statement tell us about the character of The Nightbuilder?

I told her who I was - the Mayor of a recessional, increasingly dilapidated seaside town, a town going to seed around me just as I ran to seed within it. A town in great need of something to bring in the crowds, to cause a buzz.

We find out a little more about the character of the Mayor. How does the mayor connect with The Nightbuilder?

The Night Builder now **eased** open the driver's-side door as I spoke. She stepped down from the cabin and approached me, dressed head to toe in cement grey - **as much H&M as trad superhero garb**.

How is the relationship developing between the two characters?

The Nightbuilder is described as very ordinary. Why is this important and a change from our previous assumptions?

1. Read the description of 'The Nightbuilder' again.
2. Discuss the passage with your partner.
3. Make a list of the things we learn about The Nightbuilder, and the things that surprise you

4. Activity: Character development continued

The Nightbuilder

Authors often use direct speech to develop the characters in their story, and help the reader empathise with the characters.

From the conversation between The Nightbuilder and our main character we learn a lot about each character.

'I've tried everything,' I continued, 'We've asked Anthony Gormley for a statement piece. We've asked Anish Kapoor. Neither replied.'

'So, you're Gormless,' quipped the Night Builder.

'Suffering Kapoverty,' I replied.

I saw a smile crease her grey balaclava. 'So, what exactly do you want?' she said.

4. How is humour used to show the relationship that is developing between the characters?
5. Look at the description of The Nightbuilder. How does the description contribute to our understanding of the character of concrete?

5. Activity: Research task

The Nightbuilder

The story continues...

I opened my eyes and looked right at her. 'I want a leaning tower.'

'What?'

'Pisa is one of the most famous towns in the world, has millions of visitors, because it's got a wonky tower.'

'You want a wonky tower?'

'Yes. To save my town.'

'I can't,' she said.

'Why?'

She sighed, paused. 'There are limits. I'm the boss of concrete. I can swish it round into whatever shape I want.'

'Right.'

'But I'm not the boss of physics. If gravity wants to pull something down, it will. The wonky Pisa tower is luck, an unrepeatable, **precarious** balance between foundations and mass and gravity. If you set out to make something that gravity almost pulls down, chances are high it will fall.'

'Damn.'

I looked right at The Nightbuilder, but she did not look back, instead just eyed the concrete **silos** behind me.

'I need to get on,' she said.

'Just think about it. Please.'

But there was no reply.

Precarious: dangerous, likely to collapse

Silo: Tall tower used to store products e.g. concrete

5. Activity: Research Task continued

“But I’m not the boss of physics. If gravity wants to pull something down, it will.”

Read the quotation from The Nightbuilder.

Look at the picture of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. What do you think The Nightbuilder means?



The Leaning Tower of Pisa



Map of Europe showing location of Pisa in Italy

The Leaning Tower of Pisa took 199 years to finish building. It was built in three stages. Marble and stone were used to build the tower.

The tower has a maximum height of 55.9 m. It is leaning by about 4° . The tower weighs 14,500 tonnes (1 tonne = 1000 kg).

Research task:

How does the Leaning tower of Pisa lean, but not fall over?

Use scanning and skimming to complete a paragraph to answer the question.

The Nightbuilder

C M Taylor

The story continues...

I traipsed out of the cement works, drove east across Ireland, taking a ferry and then three trains to arrive home defeated and exhausted the next day, vowing not to talk of my failed adventure, vowing to deflect and **shun** the curiosity of my secretary Jim, and those others on my staff whom he had undoubtedly told.

Shun: Ignore

The Night Builder's work in Ireland was another blazing success, a beautiful, slender footbridge across Sligo's Garavogue river, linking an old people's home on one side to a public park and primary school on the other, and I read and watched everything I could about her latest masterpiece of clandestine civic **benevolence**, hoping for one of my own. Hoping less though through the end of that summer and on into the skin-stinging Autumn, with hope then exhausted as later I walked each winter day along the dilapidated promenade to stare in brooding grief at the place in the sea where my darlings had drowned.

Benevolence: well meaning or kind. Generous

On the 13th anniversary of their death, I awoke not with the leaden **trepidation** which I now habitually brought to that dreaded day, but with a fizzing, puzzled curiosity. My room sounded different somehow, was filled with a hive of distant, lively sounds.

Trepidation: feeling fear or anxiety

I got out of bed, walked to the window, and threw back the curtains to see my street in buzzing conclave, people rushing from their houses in ones and twos, moving excitedly down the road towards the shore. I checked my silenced phone – there were fourteen messages from Jim – then hurled on some clothes and made the front door.

A hand-delivered envelope was wagging half-in, half-out of the letterbox, the words 'Open me, tonight' penned on its front. Stuffing the envelope in my pocket, I quickly left the house, joining the tributaries of people until soon I stood with most of the town it seemed in an awe-struck huddle on the promenade.

The sight in front of us was magnificent.

6. Activity: Comparing characters

Embedded into the shingle beach of my dull hometown there now stood a perfect concrete copy of the leaning tower of Pisa. **Thrusting** eight **precariously** tilting storeys high into the winter sky, the tower was topped by a bell chamber and circled by thuggish gulls. Arches piled on top of arches ringed the girth of the immaculate, impossible tower as the whole town stood and stared, as the press began to arrive, as the whole world – I felt and I knew - began to hear for the first time the name of my decaying little home. I closed my eyes and pictured myself again in Pisa, beside my husband and my girl, alongside many tourists: tourists – or people like them – who'd even now be making excited way to our once-dreary corner, to stand and to marvel at our miracle tower, and to spend their cash at the chip shop, and on coffees and on cakes and ice creams in the hotels and the cafes and bars.

Already the town was returning to life.

And did I feel that life coming back to myself?

Feel for the first time a lessening of my grief?

Perhaps I did, but...

'Get ready!' a voice boomed behind me, and I turned my head - as all others also turned theirs - to see a grey-clad figure standing on the roof of the mayor's office behind us on the promenade. I recognised her immediately. The Night Builder, in her concrete grey balaclava.

'Get ready,' she shouted. 'It's going to go.'

I looked back over to the tower, realising only then that there was nobody stood around its base, seeing only then that access to the beach had been fenced off, and that all the town was confined to the promenade, with not one soul down on the shingle shore.

Thrusting: Pushing something

Precariously: not secure, or in danger of collapse

6. Activity: Comparing characters continued

How is The Nightbuilder similar to Banksy?

The Inventive Podcast's Trevor Cox describes Roma's love of concrete as influencing C M Taylor to create The Nightbuilder a story which features a "mysterious Banksy-like character."

But who is Banksy and how is he similar to The Nightbuilder?

Banksy is a British street and graffiti artist. He has chosen to remain anonymous and does not let people know his true identity. He often draws in highly visible public places, such as on buildings or train stations. His paintings are often about politics, war, and other important topics.



Credit: Dominic Robinson from Bristol, UK [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)
via Wikimedia Commons

*Girl and heart balloon by Banksy,
Waterloo Bridge, London*

Research Task

1. Use the internet to find out 5 key facts about Banksy. Use scanning and skimming to collect your facts.
2. Now complete the table to identify similarities and differences between The Nightbuilder and Banksy.

Similarities	Differences

The Nightbuilder

C M Taylor

The story ends...

As the months passed and as fish swam in and out of the fallen arches, and as barnacles prospered and seaweed grew along it, people came in their droves to see the fallen tower and the town grew plumper and **commodious**.

Commodious: roomy, comfortable

I had done my job.

I resigned. I had been a good mayor.

And on nights now when my loneliness grows fretful, I can walk across the promenade down to the shore and mount the fallen tower, walking down to the place where the concrete meets the sea, and there I can feel somehow as close to my darlings as ever I did.

The End

**Now answer one of the questions on the next page.
remember to use the story to support your points.**

"My personal wish for a superpower would be to be able to swish concrete like Magneto from X-Men ... I would like equivalent powers over concrete"

Roma Agrawal



"Concrete has an amazing story, you can almost treat it as a character."

Roma Agrawal

7. Activity: Essay question

Question 1: How does The Nightbuilder support the following quote:

“Not all superheroes wear capes.”

Points to consider:

- What does Roma think would be her superpower? Explain this.
- How has C M Taylor developed the idea of a superhero through the story? Don't forget to use evidence from the story.
- Superheroes help people. How does The Nightbuilder help the mayor personally and help the town.
- In your opinion, is The Nightbuilder a superhero?

Question 2: How is Roma's love of concrete illustrated through the character of The Nightbuilder?

Points to consider:

- What does Roma say about her love of concrete? Why is it important?
- How is the character of The Nightbuilder likened to concrete? Use references from the story to show this.
- The Mayor is certain the town will be saved and she will be healed with a concrete building. How does this illustrate Roma's feelings about concrete?