



11+ Reading Task Sample Texts

All applicants will take part in a reading task in which they explore and read a short extract from a play in a small group setting. This task aims to assess each applicant's ability to engage with a given text, think critically and work collaboratively.

Some examples of these short extracts can be found below.

NOUGHTS & CROSSES

(Adapted from Malorie Blackman's novel)

ACT ONE, SCENE TWO

Scene Two

Callum's House.

CALLUM (to audience).

Looking at our run-down hovel, I could feel the usual burning churning sensation begin to rise up inside me. My stomach tightened, my eyes began to narrow. Soon as I opened the front door, there was our living room with its fifth-hand threadbare nylon carpet and its seventh-hand cloth sofa. Why couldn't my family live in a house like Sephy's?

(The MCGREGOR FAMILY are now seated at the table. CALLUM moves around as he introduces them.)

CALLUM (to audience).

My family: Three years ago, Mum and Sephy's mother were really close. Mum was nanny to Sephy's sister, and then Sephy. One week, Mrs Hadley and Mum were like best friends, and the next week, Mum and I were no longer welcome anywhere near the Hadley house. No idea why. Dad isn't bothered about much - just keeps his head down. Jude, my seventeen-year-old

brother, is a really irritating toad. Ever since I got into Heathcroft, he's become totally unbearable. Lynette, my sister: We've always been close. Closer than Jude and me. But something happened which changed Lynette. An accident. Now she doesn't go out, doesn't talk much, doesn't think much, as far as I can tell. She just is. 'Away with the fairies,' as Grandma used to say. I can't get in and she doesn't come out. But her mind takes her to somewhere peaceful, I think. Sometimes I envy her.

(The MCGREGORS are halfway through supper.)

MEGGIE.

Where've you been, Callum? I was worried sick.

(CALLUM sits.)

Well, I'm waiting. Where were you?

JUDE.

He was with his Dagger friend.

MEGGIE.

Don't use that word please, Jude.

CALLUM (to audience).

Jude never called them Crosses. They were always Daggers.

MEGGIE.

Well, were you with that girl again?

CALLUM.

No, Mum, I went for a walk. That's all.

RYAN.

Meggie, leave the lad alone.

MEGGIE.

That had better be all.

(MEGGIE serves CALLUM's food.)

CALLUM.

Hi, Lynny.

(LYNETTE is in her own world.)

You all right?

(Pause.)

MEGGIE.

Where were you walking?

CALLUM.

Oh, round and about.

MEGGIE.

Hmm.

LYNETTE.

What am I doing here?

(Silence.)

I shouldn't be here. I'm not one of you. I'm a Cross.

JUDE.

What're you talking about? Look at your skin. You're just as white as the rest of us. Whiter.

LYNETTE.

But my skin's a beautiful colour. So dark and rich and wonderful.

JUDE.

I'm fed up with this. She's a ruddy nutter.

RYAN.

Don't talk to your sister like that, please.

JUDE.

And Callum's no better. Lord of the ruddy manor.

CALLUM.

You don't know what you're talking about.

RYAN.

We'd appreciate some peace and quiet at the dinner table, please.

JUDE.

Look at you, peering down your nose at us just because you've come back from your precious Dagger girlfriend. You hate us and you hate yourself just because you weren't born one of them. I'm the only one of the three of us who knows what he is and is proud of it.

CALLUM.

Shut up, you brainless...

(JUDE springs up, ready to hit CALLUM. CALLUM matches him.)

JUDE.

Come on then, if you think you're hard enough.

RYAN.

I've had a very long day, Jude. Now stop it.

(CALLUM slowly sits down. JUDE follows.)

LYNETTE.

I can't be a Nought. I just can't.

MEGGIE.

Listen, Lynette.

LYNETTE.

I'm a Cross. Closer to God.

JUDE.

Stupid cow.

RYAN.

Jude!

LYNETTE.

Don't you think I'm beautiful, Callum?

CALLUM.

Yes I do, Lynette. Very.

(Pause.)

RYAN.

Ready for school tomorrow, Callum?

CALLUM.

Ready as I'll ever be.

MEGGIE.

I hope you're not making a mistake.

RYAN.

He's not.

JUDE.

He doesn't need to go to their schools. We don't have to mix with them.

CALLUM.

What's wrong with mixing?

MEGGIE.

It never works. We should be able to educate our own. Not wait for the Crosses to do it for us.

RYAN.

You never used to believe that.

MEGGIE.

Well, I'm not as naïve as I used to be. Jasmine Hadley opened my eyes.

CALLUM (to audience).

What would satisfy all the Noughts and Crosses who felt the same as Mum? Separate countries? Separate planets? How far away is far enough?

RYAN.

Meggie, if our boy is going to get anywhere in this life, he has to learn to play the game. He has just got to be better at it than them. That's all.

MEGGIE.

That's all!

RYAN.

Don't you want something more for your son than we had?

MEGGIE.

How can you ask me that?

CALLUM.

I'm sure everything will be fine, Mum.

JUDE.

You'll soon think you're too good for us.

RYAN.

Of course he won't. You'll be on your best behaviour, won't you? You'll be representing all of us Noughts at the school.

CALLUM.

Why do I have to represent all Noughts? Why can't I just represent myself?

RYAN.

You must show them they're wrong about us. Show them we're just as good as they are.

MEGGIE.

He doesn't need to go to their stuck-up school to show them that.

JUDE.

He'll soon be as bad as they are.

RYAN.

A son of mine at Heathcroft School. Imagine that!

CHARLOTTE'S WEB

(Adapted by Joseph Robinette, from the book by E.B. White)

SCENE: An open space in a farmyard.

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: In darkness, the sounds of a farm just before daybreak are heard: crickets, hoot-owls, whippoorwills, etc. The sounds may be on tape or produced "live" offstage by the actors. The lights come up faintly as the NARRATOR enters.

NARRATOR (to AUDIENCE).

Shhh! Listen to the sounds of the morning. Very, very early morning. So early, in fact, the sun isn't even up yet. Listen to the crickets...the hoot-owls...a frog down by the pond...a dog up at the next farm... And today there's another sound. It tells that something exciting happened during the night. *(Squealing of young pigs is heard off.)* Some brand-new pigs were born.

(WILBUR, a pig, enters in wide-eyed amazement.)

NARRATOR.

Here's one of them right now—exploring his new home. His name is—well, actually, he doesn't have a name yet. For the moment, he's still just a little pig. But as you'll see, he isn't just any ordinary pig.

WILBUR.

Who am I? Where am I? I've never been here before. (A beat.) I've never been anywhere before. Everything seems so strange. But I like it...I think.

NARRATOR.

The new pig has been born here at the Arables' farm. Before long, we'll meet the Arables. We'll also meet the others—the people and the animals—who will play an important part in the little pig's life. (A beat.) Now, where should we start? Wait a minute. We've already started. It's early morning. We're at the Arables' farm. Some pigs were born during the night. And the sun is just beginning to come up. For now, that's all you need to know.

(The NARRATOR exits as the lights come up full. A rooster crows. Delighted, WILBUR looks off in the direction of the sound. He excitedly explores his new environment until he hears offstage voices. NOTE: FERN and MRS. ARABLE may appear, if desired, with the 2nd ACTOR playing MRS. ARABLE.)

FERN'S VOICE (off).

Where's Papa going with that ax?

MRS. ARABLE'S VOICE (off).

Out to the hoghouse. Some pigs were born last night.

FERN'S VOICE.

I don't see why he needs an ax -

MRS. ARABLE'S VOICE.

Well, one of the pigs is a runt. It's very small and weak.

(WILBUR looks about in alarm, then points to himself and mouths the word "me?")

So your father has decided to do away with it.

(WILBUR runs to downstage corner in fear.)

FERN'S VOICE.

I've got to stop him.

(FERN, a young girl, enters hurriedly.)

FERN.

Papa can't kill it just because it's smaller than the others.

(FERN sees WILBUR. She looks at him lovingly for a moment, then starts toward him. JOHN ARABLE, Fern's father, enters from another direction carrying an ax.)

FERN (shielding WILBUR who cringes behind her).

Papa, please don't kill it. It's unfair.

(WILBUR nods vigorously.)

ARABLE.

Fern, I know more about raising a litter of pigs than you do. A weakling makes trouble. Now run along!

FERN.

But it's unfair. The pig couldn't help being born small, could it? *(WILBUR shakes his head.*

This is the most terrible case of injustice I ever heard of. (WILBUR nods. FERN and WILBUR fold their hands pleadingly.)

ARABLE (after a pause).

Oh... All right. I'll let you take care of it for a little while.

(WILBUR collapses in relief.)

FERN (hugging ARABLE).

Thank you, Papa.

(She runs to WILBUR and pets him.)

ARABLE (or MRS. ARABLE, if she is onstage).

You can start him on a bottle, like a baby.

(AVERY, Fern's older brother, enters carrying an air rifle in one hand and a wooden dagger in the other.)

AVERY.

What's going on? What's Fern doing over there?

ARABLE.

Your sister has a guest for breakfast, Avery. In fact, for a little while, she's going to be raising that pig.

AVERY (taking a closer look at WILBUR).

You call that miserable thing a pig?

(WILBUR turns his nose up at the remark.)

He's nothing but a runt.

(WILBUR tries to draw himself up in a "he-man" pose, but is not very successful. AVERY laughs.)

ARABLE.

Come in the house and eat your breakfast, Avery. The school bus will be along in half-an-hour.

(He and AVERY exit, as well as MRS. ARABLE if she is onstage.)

FERN.

My very own pig.

(WILBUR smiles.)

Now, I have to name you. A perfect name for a perfect pig. *(She thinks for a moment.)* Fred.

That's a good name...but not for you. Clarence...no, you don't look like a Clarence...

Maximillion. Because you're worth a million to me... *(A pause. They BOTH laugh and shake their heads.)* Maybe I'm trying too hard. Let's see... Barney, Herman, Newton, Warren, Willie,

Wilbur, William—

(WILBUR nudges her.)

Wait a minute. Wilbur.

(WILBUR nods. Trying it out.)

Willll-bur. *(WILBUR smiles and nods vigorously.)* Wilbur. What a beautiful name!

MRS. ARABLE'S VOICE (off).

Breakfast, Fern!

FERN.

I'm coming! I mean we're coming. Fern and Wilbur!

(FERN takes Wilbur's hand, and they exit. The NARRATOR enters.)

NARRATOR.

Fern loved Wilbur more than anything. Every morning as soon as she got up, she warmed his milk, tied his bib on and warmed his bottle for him.

(WILBUR enters wearing a bib and sucking a bottle.)

NARRATOR.

Everyday was a happy day for Wilbur. He was very contented living with Fern and the Arable family.

WILBUR.

I love it here.

NARRATOR.

No longer was Wilbur a runt. *(WILBUR pulls himself up.)* He was growing each day. *(Somewhat cockily, he strikes a pose.)* In fact, he was becoming quite a specimen of a pig.

WILBUR (flexing his muscle).

I chalk it up to good, clean living.

ARABLE'S VOICE (off).

Supper time, Wilbur.

WILBUR.

And to good fattening food.

(ARABLE enters carrying a bucket.)

ARABLE.

Okay, pig, it's time you graduated from a bottle to slops. Skim milk, potato skins, leftover sandwiches and marmalade drippings.

(WILBUR repeats each item after ARABLE with growing enthusiasm. He fairly swoons as ARABLE hands him the bucket, takes the bottle, removes the bib and exits. WILBUR quickly "drinks" from the bucket, stopping occasionally to "chew".)

NARRATOR.

Before long Wilbur was five weeks old.

WILBUR.

I'd say it's about time for a birthday party.

NARRATOR.

He was big.

WILBUR.

Now let them call me a runt.

NARRATOR.

And strong.

WILBUR.

Anyone for arm-wrestling?

NARRATOR.

And healthy.

WILBUR.

Check out the pink in these cheeks.

NARRATOR.

And he was ready to be sold.

WILBUR.

For a pretty fair price, I'm willing to— (A beat, then with panic.) Sold!? Oh, no!
(The NARRATOR exits as WILBUR drops his bucket and collapses.)

FERN'S VOICE (off).

No, Papa, you can't sell him. You just can't.

(ARABLE enters, followed by FERN.)

ARABLE.

He's eating too much. I can't provide for him any longer. I've already sold Wilbur's ten brothers and sisters.

(FERN runs to the trembling WILBUR. She sobs and embraces him.)

FERN.

Oh, Wilbur. Wilbur!

ARABLE (after a beat).

Oh, all right. Maybe we can call the Zuckermans. Your Uncle Homer sometimes raises pigs. And if Wilbur goes there to live, you can walk down the road and visit him anytime you like.

FERN.

Oh, thank you, Papa. Thank you.

ARABLE.

Come along. We'll call Uncle Homer.

(He picks up the bucket. FERN and WILBUR embrace in a great relief, then shake hands.)

FERN.

Can Wilbur come, too?

ARABLE.

Why not? Maybe we'll let him make the call himself. *(He laughs as they start to leave.)*

FERN.

It's not funny. He can talk, you know.

ARABLE.

Oh, Fern. What an imagination!

(They exit. The scene changes to the Zuckerman barn. HOMER ZUCKERMAN enters carrying a trough and an armload of straw which he sets down.)

HOMER (looking about).

Dirt, spider webs. That pig oughtta feel right at home in this barn. (Hammering is heard offstage. HOMER calls off.) Patch that fence up real good Lurvy. We don't want the pig to get out of the barnyard! I'd better slide this door back so he can't get in there where the cows are either. (He slides a sizable door at R across an opening. A large spider web is revealed behind the door as it is moved.) I still can't believe we're going to have a new pig around here. But Fern seemed so desperate to find a home for it, I just couldn't say no. Anyway, it won't be long till that pig's big enough to kill and eat.

FERN'S VOICE (off).

Uncle Homer! Are you in there?

HOMER.

Here they are. Come on in, Fern.

(FERN and WILBUR enter.)

FERN.

Hi, Uncle Homer. I'd like you to meet Wilbur.

HOMER.

Oh, he has a name, does he? (He laughs.) Well, here's your new home, pig, uh, Wilbur. Hope you like it. Fern, your Aunt Edith just opened a big can of peaches. Let's go in and have a dish.

FERN.

Okay. Thanks. But let me stay with Wilbur just for a minute...till he gets used to his surroundings.

HOMER.

Sure thing. (He laughs and exits. For a moment FERN and WILBUR look about.)

FERN.

It's very nice here, Wilbur. (He smiles.) And I can come down and visit you almost everyday. (He nods.) Now I'd better go. I'll see you tomorrow. (They wave to each other as FERN exits.)

WILBUR (after a beat).

I know I'm going to miss living with the Arables, but this place doesn't seem too bad. It's a very large barn. And old, I'll bet. I like the smell. Hay and manure. Horses and cows. It has a peaceful smell...as though nothing bad could happen ever again in the world. (A beat.) Fern was right. It is very nice here.

(WILBUR yawns, lies down and closes his eyes. A moment later, TEMPLETON, a rat, enters and regards the dozing WILBUR suspiciously.)

TEMPLETON (out of Wilbur's earshot).

So, this is our new resident. That's right. Relax and enjoy yourself—while you can. Oh, yes. They'll treat you very well. And fatten you up very nicely. Then suddenly one day you wake up and (He makes a slitting sign across his neck with his finger.)—it's all over. Oh well, I will admit it's nice to have a pig around the place again. That means leftover slops for me. I'm sure you'll find it in your charitable little heart to share your food with dear old Templeton.

(TEMPLETON chuckles with a sneer, then creeps away as he hears the GOOSE and the GANDER entering. They circle WILBUR, studying him carefully.)

GOOSE.

Hello, hello, hello.

WILBUR (a bit startled).

Who...who are you?

GOOSE.

The Goose.

WILBUR.

Oh. Hi, Goose.

GOOSE.

And this is my friend, the Gander, Gander, Gander.

WILBUR.

But I only see one Gander. You introduced me to three.

GOOSE.

No, no, no.

GANDER.

We tend to repeat, repeat, repeat ourselves.

GOOSE.

Do you have a name...besides "pig"?

WILBUR.

Yes. They call me Wilbur.

TEMPLETON'S VOICE (off).

Wilbur? That's a pretty tacky name, if you ask me.

WILBUR.

Who was that?

GOOSE.

Well, nobody, nobody, nobody asked you.

GANDER.

Templeton, the rat.

(TEMPLETON enters).

TEMPLETON.

In person.

SHEEP'S VOICE (off).

What's all the commotion in here?

GOOSE.

It's the old, old sheep.

(The SHEEP enters).

GANDER.

We have a new resident.

GOOSE.

His name is Wilbur.

SHEEP.

Oh, yeah. I overheard the Zuckermans discussing him.

WILBUR (pleased).

Discussing me?

SHEEP.

They plan to keep you nice and comfortable. And fatten you up with delicious slops.

WILBUR.

Oh, I am going to like it here.

SHEEP.

Just the same, we don't envy you. You know why they want to make you fat and tender, don't you?

WILBUR.

No, I don't.

GOOSE.

Now, now, now old sheep. He'll learn soon enough.

WILBUR.

Learn what? (A beat.)

SHEEP.

Oh, nothing. Nothing at all. Nice to meet you... Wilbur.
(He exits.)

WILBUR (a bit concerned).

My pleasure, I'm sure.

GOOSE.

Well, I have eggs to hatch. (She exits.)

TEMPLETON.

And I have trash piles to raid. (He exits.)

GANDER.

Good-good-good night, Wilbur. Better get some rest after such a long day. (He exits.)

WILBUR.

Yes, thank you, I will. The animals seem nice...I think. But I'm not so sure about Templeton. (Another beat.) And I'm a trifle concerned about the old sheep's remark. (Slightly imitating Sheep's voice.) "You know why they want to make you fat and tender, don't you?"... Well, I'm not going to worry about it just now. I'm much too tired.

(WILBUR yawns, lies down and closes his eyes. As the lights slowly dim, CHARLOTTE, a spider, comes out from behind the web. She carefully creeps over to WILBUR and smiles. NOTE: If desired, CHARLOTTE may remain offstage during the following speech. If so, only her voice is heard.)

CHARLOTTE (quietly).

Go to sleep, Wilbur. Go to sleep little pig.

(CHARLOTTE crosses back U and disappears behind the web. The lights are low. WILBUR is sleeping. The NARRATOR enters, and noises of thunder, lightning and rain are heard. The lights come up slowly as WILBUR stirs.)

WILBUR.

Oh, no. Morning already. And it's raining. In my dreams I had made such grand plans for today. Let's see.

NARRATOR.

Six-thirty.

WILBUR.

Breakfast.

NARRATOR.

Seven o'clock.

WILBUR.

A nap indoors.

NARRATOR.

Eight o'clock.

WILBUR.

A nap outdoors.

NARRATOR.

Nine o'clock.

WILBUR.

Dig a hole.

NARRATOR.

Ten o'clock.

WILBUR.

Fill up the hole.

NARRATOR.

Eleven o'clock.

WILBUR.

Just stand still and enjoy life.

NARRATOR.

Twelve noon.

WILBUR.

Lunch.

NARRATOR.

One o'clock.

WILBUR.

Sleep.

NARRATOR.

Two o'clock.

WILBUR.

Scratch itchy places against the fence.

NARRATOR.

Three o'clock.

WILBUR.

A visit from Fern.

NARRATOR.

Four o'clock.

WILBUR.

Supper.

NARRATOR.

And four-thirty on—

WILBUR.

Free time! (A pause.) I get everything all beautifully planned out, and it has to go and rain.

(After a final outburst of thunder and lightning, the NARRATOR exits.)

I'm lonesome. And I know Fern won't come in such bad weather. Oh, honestly. I'm less than two months old and already I'm tired of living.

(LURVY enters carrying a bucket. He wears a raincoat and hat.)

LURVY.

Morning, pig. My name's Lurvy. I'm Mr. Zuckerman's helper. I'm the one that feeds you. Time for...

ORPHEUS

By Ted Hughes

CHARACTERS

- NARRATOR
- EURYDICE
- ORPHEUS
- FRIEND ONE
- FRIEND TWO
- FRIEND THREE
- PLUTO
- PERSEPHONE
- VOICE
- TREES
- STONES

NARRATOR:

This is the story
Of Orpheus the Magician, whose magic was music.

(Music-guitar-pop.)

This is the dance of the trees.
His music is so magic, he makes the trees dance.
The oaks unknot; they toss their limbs
And the willows whirl in a ring.

This is the dance of the trees.
(Music stops. Giant sigh from all trees.)

And this is the dance of the stones.
(Music for stones - still pop.)

His music is so magic the stones dance.
The rocks uproot and caper in their places,
The pebbles skip like mice,
The ordinary stones bounce like footballs.
This is the dance of the stones.

(Music stops. Sigh from all stones.)
His music reaches out to the bears in the forest.
(Bear music - still pop.)

It reaches up to the deer in the wrinkles of the hills.

(Deer music.)

It reaches down to the salmon in the pools below the falls.

(Salmon music.)

And wherever his music is heard, the dancing begins.

(Music.)

His music has a name. Its name is happiness.

Every living thing loves Orpheus

Because his music is happiness.

(Eurydice becomes visible.)

And this is the cause of Orpheus' happiness:

This is his wife, for her he makes his music.

ORPHEUS:

Why shouldn't I be happy?

The world is beautiful.

Day after day the huge gift of the world

Is beautiful as ever.

More beautiful than the whole world is my wife

Eurydice.

This is the secret of my music.

It is all for Eurydice, my happiness.

Music.

NARRATOR:

Nevertheless, there keeps coming a voice

To Orpheus - a voice which he does not like.

VOICE:

Beware, Orpheus, beware.

NARRATOR:

He dare not listen to the voice. He plays louder.

Music louder, to drown out the voice.

NARRATOR:

Is it the voice of a bird? Or a spider? Or a serpent?

VOICE (very loud):

Beware, Orpheus, beware.

(Music stops.)

VOICE (very soft):

Beware, beware, beware.

ORPHEUS:

What should I beware of? Why should I beware?

VOICE:

In the world of the trees,
In the world of the stones,
In the world of the frog, of the vole, of the linnet -
Every song has to be paid for.

ORPHEUS:

Nonsense!
The world is a gift.
The brave take it with thanks and greet it with song.
Only the fearful peer at it with suspicion,
Thinking about the payment.

VOICE:

Beware, Orpheus, beware.
(Orpheus drowns the voice with a storm of his music.)

NARRATOR:

Orpheus hammers his guitar nevertheless.
And the trees dance once again
And the stones dance.
The deer on the hills, and the salmon in the weirs
And the bears in the holes of the forest
And the travellers out on the roads
Dance, dance when they hear it.
The world dances with happiness.
But suddenly -
(Music falters and stops.)

ORPHEUS:

My hand! Something has happened to my hand.

NARRATOR:

Orpheus' hand suddenly becomes numb.

(Sudden terrible cry in distance; voice coming nearer; a friend bringing the news.)

FRIEND:

Orpheus! (Nearer.) Orpheus!

ORPHEUS:

Who is that?

FRIEND (nearer):

Orpheus!

ORPHEUS:

Here.

FRIEND (very close, entering):

Orpheus!

ORPHEUS:

Your face is terrifying. So is your voice.

What is your news?

FRIEND:

Eurydice is dead.

(Magnified crash of strings, as if instruments smashed. Light effects - sudden darkening.)

NARRATOR:

Eurydice lies dead in the orchard, bitten by a snake.

Her soul has left her body. Her body is cold.

Her voice has been carried away to the land of the dead.

ORPHEUS:

Eurydice!

(He lies prostrate. His music - now erratic and discordant - struggles to tormented climax and again collapses as if all instruments smashed. Light effects.)

NARRATOR:

Orpheus mourns for a month and his music is silent.

The trees droop their boughs; they weep leaves.

The stones in the wall weep.

The river runs silent with sorrow under its willows.

The birds sit mourning in silence on the ridge of the house.

Orpheus lies silent and face downwards.

His friends try to rouse him.

FRIEND:

Orpheus, you are mourning too long. The dead are dead.

Remember the living. Let your own music heal your sorrow.

Play for us.

NARRATOR:

The trees know better.

TREES:

We shall never dance again. Eurydice is dead.

Now we return to the ancient sadness of the forest.

NARRATOR:

And the stones know better.

STONES:

We are the stones, older than life. We have stood by many graves. We know grief to the bottom. We danced for a while because Orpheus was happy.

Eurydice is dead. Now we return to the ancient sadness of the hills.

NARRATOR:

But still his friends try to rouse him.

FRIENDS ONE, TWO and THREE:

Eurydice did not want you to grieve so long, Orpheus.

Play your music again.

Deceive your grief. Defeat evil fortunes.

The dead belong to the dead, the living to the living. Play for us.

NARRATOR:

Have they succeeded?

At last! Orpheus reaches for the magic strings.

One note, repeated, gathering volume and impetus - insane.

FRIENDS ONE, TWO and THREE:

Horrible! Is this music?

He has forgotten how to play. Grief has damaged his brain.

This is not music.

ORPHEUS:

I am going down to the underworld.

To find Eurydice.

FRIENDS:

Mad! He is mad! Orpheus has gone mad!

ORPHEUS:

I am going to the bottom of the underworld.

I am going to bring Eurydice back.

FRIEND ONE:

Nobody ever came back from the land of the dead.

ORPHEUS:

I am going. And I shall come back.

With Eurydice.

FRIENDS:

Mad! He is mad! Orpheus has gone mad!

Nobody ever returns from the land of the dead.

(Their voices fade. His crazy note strengthens, modulating into electronic infernal accompaniments. Major light effects through what follows.)

NARRATOR:

(Speaking with greatly magnified voice over the music - not declaiming so much as a giant whisper)

Where is the land of the dead? Is it everywhere? Or nowhere.

How deep is the grave?

What is the geography of death?

What are its frontiers?

Perhaps it is a spider's web. Perhaps it is a single grain of dirt.

A million million souls can sit in an atom.

Is that the land of the dead?

A billion billion ghosts in the prison of an atom

Waiting for eternity to pass.

(Orpheus music louder. Light effects.)

NARRATOR:

Orpheus beats his guitar. He is no longer making music.

He is making a road of sound. He is making a road through the sky. A road to Eurydice.

ORPHEUS:

Eurydice! Eurydice! Eurydice!

NARRATOR:

He flies on his guitar. His guitar is carrying him.

It has lifted him off the earth. It lifts him over the treetops.

(Music continuing, the monotonous note like a drum note insistent.)

FRIENDS:

Orpheus, come back! Orpheus, come back!

ORPHEUS:

Eurydice!

NARRATOR:

It carries him into a cloud.

(Light and sound effects through what follows, his music continuing throughout.)

Through the thunder he flies. Through the lightning.

It carries him

Through the storm of cries,

The last cries of all who have died on earth,

The jealous, screaming laments

Of all who have died on earth and cannot come back.

(Storm of cries.)

ORPHEUS:

Eurydice!

NARRATOR:

He lays his road of sound across the heavens.

His guitar carries him.

Into the storm of blood,

The electrical storm of all the blood of all who have died on earth.

He is whirled into the summit of the storm.

Lightnings strike through him, he falls -

ORPHEUS:

Eurydice!

NARRATOR:

He falls into the mouth of the earth.

He falls through the throat of the earth, he recovers.

He rides his serpent of sound through the belly of the earth.

He drives his spear of sound through the bowels of the earth.

Mountains under the earth fall on him, he dodges.

He flies through walls of burning rock and ashes.

His guitar carries him.

(Music continuing monotonous and insane.)

He hurtles towards the centremost atom of the earth.

He aims his beam of sound at the last atom.

ORPHEUS:

Eurydice!

NARRATOR:

He smashes through the wall of the last atom.

He falls

He falls

At the feet of Pluto, king of the kingdom of the dead.

(Silence. Appropriate light effects.)

PLUTO:

So you have arrived. At first I thought it was a fly. Then I thought it was a meteorite. But now I see - it is a man. A living man, in the land of the dead. Stand. I am Pluto, king of the underworld. And you, I think, are Orpheus.

NARRATOR:

Orpheus stands on the floor of the hall of judgement, like a mouse on the floor of a cathedral. Pluto's face, vast on his vast throne, is made of black iron, and it is the face of a spider. The face of Persephone, his wife and queen, vast on her vast throne, beside him, is made of white ivory, and it is the pointed, eyeless face of a maggot.

PLUTO:

Orpheus! I have heard of you. What is it, Orpheus, brings you alive to the land of the dead?

ORPHEUS:

You took away my wife Eurydice.

PLUTO:

That is true.

ORPHEUS:

What can I do to get her back?

PLUTO:

Get her back?

(Laughs - Plutonic laughter in hell.)

Alas, your wife has gone into the vaults of the dead. You cannot have her back.

ORPHEUS:

Release her. You are a god. You can do as you like.

PLUTO:

Some things are not in my power, Orpheus. Here is my wife, for instance, Persephone. Perhaps you have heard about her. Six months she spends with me, here in the underworld. Six months she is up on earth, in the woods and meadows, with her mother. That is the arrangement. Up on the earth she is a flower-face, she laughs and sings; everybody adores her. But now you see her. Here in the underworld she is quite different. She never makes a sound. Never speaks, never sings. And you see her face? It is the peaked face of a maggot. Yet it is not a maggot. It is the white beak of the first sprout of a flower. I have never seen it open. Here in the underworld it is closed - white, pointed and closed - the face of a maggot. Here is something I cannot alter. There is another thing, Orpheus. Here in the underworld, the accounting is strict. A payment was due for you.

ORPHEUS:

Payment?

PLUTO:

Nothing is free. Everything has to be paid for. For every profit in one thing - payment in some other thing. For every life - a death. Even your music - of which we have heard so much - that had to be paid for. Your wife was the payment for your music. Hell is now satisfied.

ORPHEUS:

You took my wife -

PLUTO:

To pay for your music.

ORPHEUS:

But I had my music from birth. I was born with it.

PLUTO:

You had it on credit. You were living in debt. Now you have paid, and the music is yours.

ORPHEUS:

Then take back my music. Give me my wife.

PLUTO:

Too late.

ORPHEUS:

What good is my music without my wife?

What can I do to make you give me my wife?

PLUTO:

Nothing can open Hell.

(Orpheus strikes a chord - no longer pop - solemn Handel, Bach, Vivaldi or earlier. Light effects.)

Now what are you doing?

Your music is even more marvellous in Hell. Than ever on earth. But it cannot help you.

Music.

ORPHEUS:

Look at your wife, Pluto. Look at Persephone, your queen.

Music.

PLUTO:

Her face is opening.

ORPHEUS:

A wife for a wife, Pluto. Shall I continue to play?

PLUTO:

Keep playing. Keep playing.

(Music stops.)

Keep playing. Why have you stopped?

ORPHEUS:

It is in my power to release the flower in your wife's face and awake her. Release my wife.

PLUTO:

Play.

ORPHEUS:

A wife for a wife.

PLUTO:

Whatever you wish. Only play. You can have your wife.

Music.

PLUTO:

Beautiful as the day I plucked her off the earth!

(Music stops.)

ORPHEUS:

You have your wife, Pluto.

PERSEPHONE:

Keep your promise, to Orpheus. Give him his wife.

PLUTO:

I cannot.

ORPHEUS:

Cannot? A god cannot break his promise. A god's promise is stronger than the god.

PLUTO:

I cannot. Your wife's body is crumbling to dust.

PERSEPHONE:

Give him her soul.

PLUTO:

I can only give you her soul.

ORPHEUS:

Let it be so. Let my wife's soul come with me.

(Light effects. Dance and mime through what follows.)

PLUTO:

You who have awakened the queen of Hell,

Return to the world. Your wife's soul will be with you.

(Orpheus' new music very soft.)

NARRATOR:

Orpheus returns to the earth. It is not far. It is only a step. A step, a step, and a step, A step and he turns. He looks for his wife. The air is empty.

(Music stops.)

ORPHEUS:

Eurydice?

EURYDICE:

I am here.

ORPHEUS:

Eurydice, where are you? Eurydice?

EURYDICE:

Here at your side, Orpheus.

NARRATOR:

He cannot see her. He cannot touch her. He can only hear her. He listens.

EURYDICE:

Play for me, Orpheus.

(Orpheus plays his new music.)

NARRATOR:

Orpheus' friends come running. They listen to his music. It is no longer the same music.

FRIEND ONE:

This won't make anybody dance.

FRIEND TWO:

This is queer music. He's gone to the dogs. This is dreary.

FRIEND THREE:

Play as you used to play, Orpheus. Make us dance.

(Music continues.)

NARRATOR:

The trees did not dance. But the trees listened.
The music was not the music of dancing
But of growing and withering,
Of the root in the earth and the leaf in the light,
The music of birth and of death.
And the stones did not dance. But the stones listened.
The music was not the music of happiness
But of everlasting, and the wearing away of the hills,
The music of the stillness of stones,
Of stones under frost, and stones under rain, and stones in the sun,
The music of the seabed drinking at the stones of the hills.
The music of the floating weight of the earth..
And the bears in their forest holes
Heard the music of bears in their forest holes,
The music of bones in the starlight,
The music of many a valley trodden by bears,
The music of bears listening on the earth for bears.
And the deer on the high hills heard the crying of wolves,
And the salmon in the deep pools heard the whisper of the snows,
And the traveller on the road
Heard the music of love coming and love going
And love lost forever,
The music of birth and of death.
The music of the earth, swaddled in heaven, kissed by its cloud and watched by its ray.
And the ears that heard it were also of leaf and of stone.
The faces that listened were flesh of cliff and of river.
The hands that played it were fingers of snakes and a tangle of flowers.