

## German Environmental Literature: 5 Representative Items

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### **Über allen Gipfeln/ ist Ruh (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)**

„Over all hilltops/ Is still“, the second of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's ‚Wayfarer's Night Songs‘, is a quintessential statement of Romantic empathy with nature. In eight short lines, it models successively the harmonious integration of humankind in the mineral, vegetable and animal spheres, ending with a hint that final peace may only be found in death, which is understood as a return to nature. One of the best known and loved poems in the German language, it was originally pencilled by the poet on the wall of a hunting hut in the woods near Ilmenau in Thuringia, on an evening in September, 1780. The lyric simplicity and tranquility of the poem are complemented by Schubert's moving musical setting (D768). A miniature masterpiece by the author of Germany's national epic, *Faust*.

### **Pfisters Mühle (Wilhelm Raabe)**

Wilhelm Raabe's short novel *Pfister's Mill* (1884) was inspired by a contemporary court case. The owners of a sugar refinery are sued by a miller and innkeeper for pollution of a river near Hannover, because the stench had driven away his customers. Idyllic scenes from the narrator's childhood in the family mill are evoked on the eve of its demolition, but nostalgia is framed by recognition of the need to live with the nation's rapid industrial development, despite the environmental damage and the cultural loss incurred. Raabe represented the dilemmas posed by industrialisation unusually directly for his time, but set them in an elegantly written, complexly structured narrative incorporating many cultural allusions. A profound reflection on industrialisation in the second half of the nineteenth century by one of the leading proponents of Poetic Realism.

### **Leben des Galilei (Bertolt Brecht)**

Bertolt Brecht's historical drama *Life of Galileo* (1937-57) is concerned with the background to and consequences of the Renaissance scientist's famous recanting of his assertion that the earth revolves around the sun (and not the sun around the earth), under threat of torture from the Inquisition. It was originally written in exile from Hitler, and conceived as an allegory of the ultimate triumph of reason and democracy over the forces of obscurantism and the vested interests of power elites, despite temporary setbacks. Brecht rewrote the play at the end of the Second World War. Prompted by the use of the atom bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he adopted a more critical attitude towards Galileo, and inserted a famous speech warning of the possibility that scientists might come to endanger humanity with their discoveries and inventions rather than work towards its good. A classic of modern epic theatre raising important questions concerning the ethics of scientific practice.

### **Störfall (Christa Wolf)**

Christa Wolf's diary-essay *Accident* (1987) depicts her personal response to the news of the nuclear accident in Chernobyl in April of the previous year. Disillusionment with nuclear technology is mapped onto broader and more profound disappointment with socialism and loss of confidence in human civilisation and progress. Though Wolf juxtaposes the rays of what she sees as an inherently destructive atomic science with the benign rays of medical technology (her brother is being operated for a brain tumor), the ending is deeply pessimistic. The book, which locates the reasons for humanity's seeming tendency towards self-destruction at least partly in male psychology and patriarchal society, and is enriched with intertextual literary allusions, triggered a fierce debate on the safety of nuclear power in the last years of the the German Democratic Republic, and reached an international audience.

### **Der Schwarm (Frank Schätzing)**

Frank Schätzing's thousand-page environmental sci-fi thriller *The Swarm* was published by in 2004. It depicts nature striking back, by means of a chain of seemingly unrelated natural disasters. These prove to be intentional attacks

by an unknown sentient species living at the bottom of the oceans. Suffering increasingly from our pollution and destruction of marine ecosystems, the Yrr have decided to bring human civilisation to an end. The plot is gripping, and the geophysics and marine biology are carefully researched. (Yrr are single-cell organisms that operate in groups or swarms [hence the novel's title], controlled by a single hive-mind.) The book was Germany's best-selling publication for eight months, has been translated into eighteen languages, and is currently being filmed. Coinciding with the release of the film *The Day After Tomorrow*, it sparked intensive public debate on climate change and the environment.